

"HOME BY ANOTHER WAY"  
Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12  
January 6, 2019  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Two baby Jesus stories for you this morning:

In early December, a few years ago, my friend, Chris Douglas, Executive Director of the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference, was setting up a wooden Nativity scene in her office. Her assistant, Jon, came into the room and found her digging frantically into boxes, scattering tissue paper every-where. "What in the world are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm searching for Jesus!" she replied with a note of desperation in her voice. "I can't find Jesus!" she cried and resumed her frantic search. Deciding it was safer in his office, Jon left her to her work. A few moments later, Chris ran into Jon's office and called out triumphantly, "I found him! I found Jesus!" while holding up the wooden baby Jesus like a prize or a major award. Jon told her that there are probably many people in the Church of the Brethren who would no doubt be grateful to hear that Chris finally found Jesus.

Just a couple of years ago a photo circulated online among my seminary friends. The photo showed a beautiful ceramic Nativity scene with the stable, the animals, and Mary and Joseph. Of course there was a manger with the figure of baby Jesus. It looked like a normal manger scene, but if you looked closely you could see a white plastic strip, a cable tie, wrapped about Jesus and the manger. The caption on the photo read, "This baby Jesus isn't going anywhere!"

Where do you think this scene was photographed-- on a busy city street or the front yard of a country church? Nope, this security conscious crèche was in the McKay Student Center at Princeton Theological Seminary. Much could be said about the theological implications of physically restraining baby Jesus - especially at a Presbyterian Seminary- but the administration had a more practical reason in mind. Seminary students have been known for their pranks so the administration feared that someone might walk off with the statue of Jesus.

I love these two stories about baby Jesus- one about the fear of not being able to find him and the other about the fear that he might disappear and end up who-knows-where. These two stories provide fertile soil for this Epiphany Sunday

as we celebrate the visit of those who searched for and worshiped Jesus. They are great stories to ponder on this Sunday as we celebrate God's invitation for the whole world to meet and worship Jesus.

Epiphany means "revelation" and it celebrates our belief that God became a person and stepped right into the midst of human history. One theologian suggests that *"there comes some moment when an important truth suddenly becomes clear, and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way forward in light of it."* (Kendra G. Holtz) For us that moment we celebrate as Epiphany is when Gentiles, non-Jews, came face to face with Jesus and knew who he was. Epiphany points us to God's universal love and universal sovereignty.

The lovely and powerful poetry from the prophet Isaiah shows us that God's love for all didn't come to be only when the wise men knelt at the manger of baby Jesus. It has been a part of God's promise from the beginning. The world, both in biblical times and today, is governed more by fear than by faith; more by exclusion than by inclusion; more by darkness than by light. The Old Testament prophet knew all about darkness. In the middle of the sixth century the Jews, the people of God, were enveloped in a fog of darkness so deep they could see no way out. The brilliance of God's new day was but a pipe dream. Their holy city was destroyed. They were living in exile in Babylon, the home of their conquerors. The dynasty of their great patriarch, King David, has come to a terrifying end. They have no land. No leader. No temple. And for many, no faith. They believe their God has forsaken and forgotten them. They are heartbroken and hopeless. They have no future and their glorious past is becoming nothing but a faded memory.

And then the prophet speaks an unlikely word of God. *"Wake up people! Get up! Turn your face toward the sun and soak in the warmth of God's glory!"* He told them their time of hiding in the shadows is over. A new day is dawning and God expects them to get up and lead the way for others into the brilliance of God's presence. This is not an invitation. It is a command. They are called to shake off the night and run into the grace of a new day. God is calling them to move from absence to presence; from despair to hope; from fear to joy.

Isaiah says, "Something new is happening." It is something they could never have hoped or dreamed for. God is moving decisively into their world and everything is

going to change. With God's intrusion they are called to look up and see the miracle- all nations are streaming toward Jerusalem, the restored and splendid holy city of God. Their sons and daughters who were sent away are returning home. Can you think of a better image to convey a new future filled with hope---- your children are coming home!

The poverty and shame of exile will be overcome when all the wealth of the world pours into Jerusalem and the city of exiles becomes a light to the nations. We often miss the crucial truth that from the beginning God has intended to bless all the families of the earth through the covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

The unbelievable is now reality- these people, these prisoners, these exiles defeated by their enemies- **these** people will become a light to all the nations. They aren't allowed to hoard or hide or ration this light- it is for all nations, for all peoples, all the time. Those who are blessed to stand in this light have a responsibility to respond to it, share it, to shine it for all to see.

This was their epiphany, the moment when an important truth suddenly became clear and because of it, they could now reinterpret their past and rethink their way forward.

I cannot think of one time in scripture that the presence of God does not call the people to change, to move on, to journey forward.

God's presence always announces a reversal of the world constructed by humans. Through the power of God the oppressed are set free, those stripped of all resources receive what was taken from them, those driven away return. The forgotten and hopeless rise to their feet and see a new future. With God it is always a new day.

We turn to the Gospel of Matthew and find that it is, once again, a desperate time for God's people. We know this from the first five words in chapter two. "In the time of King Herod." Matthew's audience would know right away what that meant and they would cringe. Just like we would know what it meant if we read, "In the time of Adolph Hitler" and we would cringe.

Anna Carter Florence gives us this description. *"Herod was one of the cruelest dictators ever to pass through the Middle East, a man so paranoid about succession that he had his own sons executed to keep them from inheriting his throne. You couldn't pick a worse time for the Messiah to be born than in the days of King Herod. You couldn't pick a worse strategy for the wise men than to cross the border into Israel, head straight for the capitol, and openly ask for the address of some baby that has been born king of the Jews- adding, of course, that this baby's birth announcement was actually written in the stars, for everyone from here to Persia to see."*

There was a good reason why, when Herod was afraid, all Jerusalem was terrified. Bad things happened when Herod was afraid- people died, blood was spilled, the innocent suffered. So Herod gathered the Jewish scholars- who, if they really knew anything at all about God and the scripture, would have already been at the stable. The scholars go back to the Old Testament prophecies and come up with an obscure text from the prophet Micah who wrote, "and you, Bethlehem." Bingo!

Herod sent the strange travelers on their way with a map and says, "When you find him please come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him too."

These travelers were definitely not Jewish and the Bible doesn't say there were three of them. Chances are they were scientists, astrologers who came from Persia or Arabia and traveled with a great caravan of camels, servants, and supplies. The grand procession makes its way about nine miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, a nowhere town in the middle of nowhere; a town whose only claim to fame was that it was the birthplace of the great King David.

Scripture isn't concerned with chronological accuracy and Matthew says they found the child and his mother in a house. We can assume it took them awhile to make the trip from their faraway land so Jesus was no longer an infant sleeping in the feed trough. The timing though, is not as important as the actions of these unusual visitors. They were outsiders, Gentiles, and yet, when they saw Jesus they fell to the ground and they worshiped him. Mary had seen some unusual sights since she

was first called by God to be the mother of the Messiah, but I doubt she ever expected a sight like this!

They gave him the rare and expensive gifts they had brought the whole way from home and then they prepared to leave. Here is what is so important about these visitors- they didn't just stumble upon Jesus. They didn't just happen to be passing by, saw the billboard, and decided to stop in. He was the whole purpose of their arduous and dangerous journey. They traveled for hundreds of miles, perhaps for several years, in the heat and the cold, over difficult and deadly terrain just to find this child, this baby King. And then they turned around and did it all again to get back home. In their persistent search they were guided by God. And they were led, again by God, to go home by another way. Not only did they take a different route home, they left as different people.

I think the truth of this story is not only that God's love, in the form of Jesus, welcomes everyone- even strangers from a foreign land- but that once you meet Jesus you can never go home the same way again.

Whether you were one of the shepherds who saw him in the manger so newly born that his hair was still wet or one of the wise ones who spoke a strange language and found him crawling around in a house- no matter who you are- or when you see him- once you meet Jesus you can never be the same again. If you really get a good look at him, you cannot walk away unchanged.

Remember this too- the presence of Jesus was not only a cause for joy, it also put people in danger. God warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and flee in the night to escape Herod's deadly plot. It was a night of terror in Bethlehem and in the morning there were no words to describe the carnage, the weeping, and the grief.

Unfortunately, we too know how to describe the darkness- Sandy Hook, Syria, Palestine, Afghanistan, Yemen, abuse, slavery, rape, white supremacy. Fear in all of its ugly forms lives and breathes in our world today just as it did in the time of Herod and in exile in Babylon.

We live in a world that feeds on fear. But we know that something new **has** happened and **is** happening. God has welcomed us into the family. God has given us the ability and the responsibility to shine. God has called us to follow the star. Remember that the stars are always shining- even when we can't see them.

This season of Epiphany is our "Aha moment." It is our reminder that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. It is our reminder that even though Christmas has come and gone, that baby in the manger isn't gone- he has grown up and he calls us to follow him. We cannot pack him away in a box for another year. We cannot tie him down.

It is precisely into this world that Jesus comes. Into our darkness. The darkness we create and that which is forced upon us. He challenges our ignorance and our fear and calls us to shine. With this knowledge we can and must stare down those who hide in the shadows. With this knowledge we can lead others into the light of God's new day.

The birth of Jesus disrupted the world. He came as a revolution wrapped in a baby blanket; the person and presence of God wearing our flesh and breathing our air.

In our journey to find Jesus we may get lost along the way. Some of us may get a little too comfortable in the grand palaces of Herod. Some of us will do everything we can to keep Jesus hidden in a box or tied to the manger. Some of us will panic when he isn't where we think he should be. Some of us will keep looking away and miss what is right in front of us. Epiphany Sunday leads us into a sparkling new year.

Let us awake and shine because our light has come! This is the light of God and it graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into our lives.

Let us jump at the invitation to participate with God in this rebellion of grace! Let us defy the voices that claim there is no light. Let us have the courage to follow Jesus- knowing that we will probably have to go home by another way.

Wherever you go- remember this: You are the light of the world!

Let your light shine before others, so that all will know the glory of God and the grace of Jesus Christ.

May it be so. Amen.