

"WELCOMING"

Matthew 2:1-12 Luke 2:22-40

January 1, 2023

York Center Church of the Brethren

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What child is this? That's a good question. Everyone we meet in the nativity stories has a different viewpoint of the child. They have all traveled different roads to meet Jesus. They have been inspired, led, and confounded by divine messengers- the angel Gabriel, an angel chorus, a star in the sky. Meeting Jesus has cost each one something precious, but their reward has been abundant.

We have already met his parents- Joseph and Mary. We have heard the story of the shepherds. Each, in their own way, welcomed the baby. Today we meet the Wise travelers and two elderly people in the Temple who whole-heartedly welcomed Jesus. We also meet one who refused to welcome him and, in fact, sought to destroy him.

The first six words of our text from Matthew tell us that this is not a story for children. Matthew's original readers surely cringed when they read, "*In the time of King Herod.*" They knew about Herod. They knew what kind of a king he was. They knew he was brutal, cruel, and selfish. Herod was the family name of six different kings who ruled over Palestine and the surrounding area as puppets of Rome, for one hundred and fifty years.

This particular Herod called Herod the Great, imprisoned and killed members of his own family when they defied him. His son, Herod Antipas, will behead John the Baptist. Like father. Like son.

The mere mention of the ominous name, Herod, would tell Matthew's readers that danger lies ahead. With the naming of this human king, fear enters the story of the birth of a divine baby.

Think about how this arrogant, insecure, power-hungry, narcissistic "king of the Jews" reacted on the day strange people arrived asking about the location of the newly born King of the Jews. Matthew calls them "wise men from the East." Do you know what is east of Palestine? Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, China.

Herod welcomed them into his palace- they were, after all, exotic and wealthy foreigners, perhaps they had something of great value to give him. What they brought with them, though, wasn't for Herod, it was for Jesus. They had been following a star that Herod and his henchmen had not even noticed. The religion scholars consulted the Hebrew scriptures and deduced that what the travelers sought was most likely in Bethlehem. This

little town didn't have much going for it except for one thing- one very important thing- it was the hometown of the great King David, the greatest Jewish king.

The exotic visitors re-set their GPS for Bethlehem and go on their way with their extravagant caravan of camels, donkeys, and servants. They go about nine miles to a town so small it wasn't on any map. And there they find the one they have been looking for. Matthew tells us that they found Jesus in a house, not in a stable like the shepherds did.

We can assume that it took them awhile to make the trip if they set out when he was born. The writers of scripture were not as concerned with accurate timelines and details as we are. What matters to Matthew is that when they saw Jesus they fell to their knees and worshiped him. They recognized and welcomed the child and gave him the most valuable gifts they had. I imagine that Mary and Joseph welcomed these strange visitors into their home, in awe, once again, at the significance of their child.

When it came time for the visitors to leave, Matthew tells us they went home by another way. While they were in his palace, King Herod had asked them to return to him with the address of the child so he could go to worship him too.

You don't get to be a Wise Man by falling for a ploy like that. A nudge from God in a dream sent them home by an alternate route. Not only did they go home by a different way, but they also went home as different people. Meeting the Messiah of God can do that to a person.

Our theme for this first Sunday after Christmas is, "Welcoming." Those who readily welcomed Jesus may not have understood everything about him, but they knew enough to know that he was a gift from God. His parents welcomed him as their baby boy, but they also knew that they had a daunting task ahead of them. How do you raise the son of God, anyway?

The shepherds, still a bit in shock from the angel chorus in the night sky, hurried to the stable to see him. They welcomed him to this earthly world and worshiped him. The baby could not have received a more heartfelt welcome.

January 6 is traditionally the day the Church celebrates Epiphany. It signifies the appearance of Jesus to the world and the arrival of the Magi who recognized and welcomed him.

Jan Richardson writes, *"As we prepare for Epiphany, God calls us to discern where the sacred shows forth, that we, too, may welcome it into our lives. The one who took on flesh reminds us that to those with eyes and hearts to perceive it, the holy appears in our midst, in our lives, and in our own selves."*

How do we respond to the incarnation- when God came to be with us as one of us? How can we possibly respond to a gift like that? With a heartfelt and hearty WELCOME, that's how.

Luke's Gospel introduces us to two other people who recognized and welcomed the baby Jesus. What makes this so significant, is that they recognize Jesus within the temple grounds, a place where, in thirty-three years, he will be NOT be recognized or welcomed by many.

Luke was a *Gentile*, a non-Jew, who was writing to *Gentile* Christians. He goes to great lengths to make sure his readers know that Jesus was a devout Jew born of devout Jews. Luke places Jesus squarely in the flow of redemptive history and in doing so he emphasizes the Jewish roots of Christianity.

Like good Jews, Mary and Joseph do what is required of them by the Law of Moses. Their son was circumcised when he was eight days old. Since Luke doesn't tell us this was done in Jerusalem, chances are that a rabbi in Bethlehem performed this ritual.

When Jesus was forty days old, they traveled about five and a half miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Mary underwent the purification ritual and Jesus was dedicated to God. The Temple grounds were probably crowded that day, as they were every day. Jesus was just one of many babies brought for dedication that day. Luke also wants us to know that the new parents brought the offering of the poor- two young pigeons. Their religious obligations fulfilled, the young family prepares to leave for the long walk back to Bethlehem, when someone stopped them. It was someone who recognized Jesus.

His name was Simeon and Luke tells us he was a very old man. He did not receive an angelic birth announcement. He didn't know Mary or Joseph. Even with all the parents carrying infants in the courtyard he went right up to Mary and Joseph and held out his arms for their baby. Luke tells us that Simeon was led to the Temple that day by the Holy Spirit.

Luke says that he was a good man, a devout man of faith who lived in prayerful expectancy of God's help for the people of God. I picture an old man with stooped shoulders, a wrinkled face, a long white beard, eyes clouded with cataracts, and fingers twisted with arthritis. When he lays eyes on Jesus a smile lights up his face and he cries out, "There you are! I would know you anywhere!" He takes the infant from his surprised parents and holds him in his arms.

Can you see the joy radiating from his face as he looks up to heaven and prays, "God, you can now bring your servant home, release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I have seen your salvation! He is here for everyone to see! He is to be a light for the Gentiles and for glory for your people, the Jews. I can now die a happy man!"

Can you imagine how Joseph and Mary are feeling right now? Here is another stranger telling them who their baby is; welcoming him with open arms. First it was Gabriel, then the shepherds, now some random guy they don't even know.

They were amazed at what the old man said. They were surprised that he recognized the true identity of their baby. With the crowds bustling around them, time stood still as the faithful Simeon gazed into the face of the one he had waited his whole life to see. As he stood there holding the warm, beautiful, breathing promise of God in his arms he told the bewildered parents that not everyone was going to welcome their child.

He looked at Mary and said, *"As many rejoice to learn who Jesus is, just that many will hate him. He will force people to choose whether they really want to get close to God or not. He will expose those who don't and they will do their best to get rid of him."*

It must have pained Simeon to speak such harsh words to this new mother, but he had to be honest, he had to speak the truth that the Holy Spirit had revealed to him.

Only one other person in that vast Temple complex recognized and welcomed Jesus that day. Her name was Anna. Luke calls her a prophet and says that she actually lived in the Temple, fasting and praying around the clock. She praised the baby as the one they had been waiting for- the redemption of the Jews, the most anticipated person in the history of the world.

Here is what touches me most about this story- Anna and Simeon knew that they were waiting for God's Messiah, but they had no reason to believe he would be a baby. No one did.

Who in their right mind would expect God's great and mighty Messiah to appear on earth as an infant? Only Anna and Simeon recognized him because they had their eyes and their hearts open to the presence and the power of God. They didn't rely on their own preconceived notions of who God was and what God could or would do. They refused to limit God, so they were open for anything- even a baby Messiah.

Anna and Simeon didn't know they were waiting for a baby. But when they saw him, it made perfect sense. James Howell writes, *"Jesus coming as a baby is God's shrewdest device. As Martin Luther put it, 'God became small for us in Christ so that our hearts might be won.' God came down not to thrash evildoers or crush the Romans but as an infant, to elicit love, to nurture tenderness."*

Simeon and Anna traveled their journeys with God without knowing the outcome, the timing, or the destination. Everyone else in Jerusalem that day just walked right past that divine gift without a second glance. They didn't know and didn't care who he was.

They had their own lives and their own families to worry about. There were no angel choirs hovering over the temple. Gabriel was nowhere to be found. There were no foreign travelers with extravagant gifts. There was just a young couple with their baby and two pigeons, not even worth a second glance. But Anna and Simeon were two ordinary Spirit-filled people who loved God so much that they would know God anywhere.

Here, in their arms, was the promised future of their God. This child they welcomed with so much joy, would one day welcome them into God's perfect future. In this baby hope finds new life as ancient promises of God are fulfilled.

Fred Craddock suggested- *"These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the Temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises. God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God keeping an old promise."* (2)

This new thing is actually a promise that had been spoken centuries before- the salvation found in Jesus is for all people- ALL people. The universal nature of the gospel is nonnegotiable for Luke. His writings- the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts- are all about abolishing all of the human created barriers- ethnic, racial, social, sexual, political, economic, and religious.

Anna and Simeon enter the story to confirm God's promises and to point to Jesus's future which is also our future. Our faithful God has intruded into our world and with the arrival of this baby comes hope.

In their book, *THE FIRST CHRISTMAS*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan remind us that Advent and Christmas are about hope for a new world; about the divine transformation of our earth. They wrote, *"It is not about some mass immigration from a doomed world to a blessed heaven. Rather, it is about the end of this era of war and*

violence, injustice and oppression. It is about the earth's transformation, not about its devastation.

*It is about a world of justice and peace. The birth stories of Jesus are not a pipe dream, but a proclamation that what we see revealed in Jesus is **the** way- the way to a different kind of life and a different future. And it requires our participation. God will not change us as individuals without our participation, and God will not change the world without our participation," (3)*

The first step in our participation is to welcome God and to welcome the One whom God sent to us, Jesus.

The only way to welcome another is to be open to the unknown and to expect the surprises of God. The only way to be welcomed is to be willing to leave where you are most comfortable to go where you are most wanted, most needed.

I will end with a poem by Jan Richardson, "Blessing of the Magi."

There is no reversing this road.

*The path that bore you here goes in one direction only,
every step drawing you down a way by which you will not return.*

*You thought arrival was everything,
that your entire journey ended with kneeling in the place
you had spent all to find.*

*When you laid down your gift,
release came with such ease,
your treasure tumbling from your hands in awe and benediction.*

*Now the knowledge of your leaving comes like a stone laid
over your heart,
the familiar path closed and not even the solace of a star
to guide your way.*

You will set out in fear.

You will set out in dream.

*But you will set out by that other road that lies in shadow and
in dark.*

*We cannot show you what route will take you home;
that way is yours and will be found in the walking.*

*But we tell you, you will wonder at how the light you thought you had left behind goes with
you,*

spilling from your empty hands,

shimmering beneath your homeward feet,

illuminating the road with every step you take. (4)

May it be so with us.
Amen.

End Notes:

- *NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS*, Jan L. Richardson, Wanton Gospeller Press. 1998. P. 93.
- *INTERPREATION SERIES: Luke*, Fred Craddock, John Knox Press. 1990. P. 40.
- *THE FIRST CHRISTMAS*, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Harper One. 2007. Pp. 240, 242.
- *CIRCLE OF GRACE: A BOOK OF BLESSINGS FOR THE SEASONS*, Jan Richardson. Wanton Gospeller Press. 2015. P.70-72.