
Back by Another Road

A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
The Feast of the Epiphany – Year C

Well, it's about that time again—the time for returns. I'm not talking about the kind of returns some of you made on December 26th—trying to exchange a dried out fruitcake for a nice bottle of Sancerre or a health club membership for a twelve-month supply of Ben and Jerry's. I'm not talking about those sorts of returns, which I myself tend to avoid since witnessing an ugly altercation over the last pair of Sonny and Cher Chia Pets at Walgreens several years ago.

No, the returns I'm talking about are the kind of returns many of us are going to have to make tomorrow morning—the return to the office, the class room, the laundry room, the board room. The return to the grocery store, where, for the first time in weeks, we'll buy kale and mineral water rather than egg nog and a wheel of Brie; the return to the house suddenly made way too big again by children and grandchildren headed back to Athens, Austin, Boston or Chapel Hill. The return, in short, to everyday life after the fleeting joys and indulgences of the holidays. Of course, not everyone dreads things getting back to normal. For some of us, this Christmas has been an anxious, lonely, or grief-stricken time, and there will be a measure of comfort in returning to the daily routine. Even so, even if this has been your experience, there is still a kind of “going back” that must occur, a letting go of what you may have hoped the holiday season would be, of what your neighbors' Christmas cards and the Hallmark Channel tell you it should have been.

In his poem *For the Time Being*, W. H. Auden describes the ending of Christmas like this:

... So that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes—
Some have got broken—and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week—
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot.
Stayed up so late, attempted—quite unsuccessfully—
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers . . .

We and W. H. Auden are hardly the first people to have struggled with this issue of how to “return” from Christmas. How to go back to the ordinary without losing sight of the extraordinary. How to go back to life as it is now that we have caught a glimpse of life as it can be.

This morning's gospel lesson tells the story of what is arguably the most famous return in all Holy Scripture. We hear a lot about the Wise Men's journey to Bethlehem—their spotting of the wondrous star; their risky detour to chat up the scheming King Herod; their joy when they arrive at the manger and see the Christ Child; their offering to him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We hear a lot about the Wise Men's journey to Bethlehem but only one thing about their journey back; namely, that “having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by a different road.”

And that's it. That's all we're told. Almost nothing. Yet it would be hard to overestimate the importance of this one little

line and all that it tells us about what it means truly to be transformed by an encounter with the Christ Child. For what this one line says in no uncertain terms is that once we have met the Babe of Bethlehem—whether we met him this year or last year or an entire lifetime ago—once we have met the Babe of Bethlehem, then we never really have to go back to life as it was before. The Wise Men, those stargazers from the East, had a choice when they left the manger about what they would do next. They could obey Herod's order and conspire in his plot to stamp out God's beacon of goodness, peace, and hope. They could do this—or they could go home by another road. You can just imagine the Wise Men's fear, can't you, their whispered conversations in the back alleys of Bethlehem as they discussed the dream they'd had in the night and how they might respond. You can imagine the simultaneous elation and dread when they chose not to go in the direction of their anxiety, chose not to go back to Herod and all that he represented—all the violence, deception, and threats, all the trampling of hope. You can imagine the Wise Men's simultaneous elation and dread when they reached their decision—a decision not to go in the direction of Herod but to go in the direction of a dream, the dream of God.

The Wise Men went back by another way. They had that opportunity, and they took it. You and I have that opportunity, too. However it was that we came to Bethlehem this year—directly, circuitously, after many wrong turns; reluctantly, with haste, kicking up our heels in great joy, dragging our feet in despair—however we came to Bethlehem, we must now go back. How we go back is up to us. We can go back the way of Herod or we can go back the way of the Wise Men. The way of Herod is the way of business as usual. The way of doing what is convenient and expedient. The way of doing what is expected because we don't want to cause a stir. The way of colluding with the forces of evil by not recognizing them when we see them and by not speaking out against them because we are afraid. The way of cynicism and of sad resignation, because, after all, “what will be, will be,” and “what can one person do?” We can go back from Christmas this way, or we can go back the way of the Wise Men—back by the way of hope, the way of joy, the way of daring and dreaming and transformation.

Many of you, I'm sure, have heard the story of how Millard Fuller, the late, great builder of houses for the poor, was making a road trip south from New York along with his wife, Linda, one day, when, on a whim, the two decided to stop in rural Georgia to visit an old friend, Clarence Jordan, at his Koinonia Farm. While at Koinonia, the Fullers took part in a Bible study where they had an encounter with Jesus unlike any they had had before. As a result of this experience, Millard and Linda never made it any farther south. Heading down the driveway to leave the farm, they suddenly felt compelled to turn their car around. Thus it was that Habitat for Humanity was born.

Our own encounters with the Christ Child may not bring about quite this dramatic a navigational change, but they can be significant nonetheless. We might alter our exercise routine one evening, running a few blocks out of our way to stop by the home of a friend who's been struggling with depression. We might change a plane ticket to tag on several days' mission work to the end of our next vacation or business trip. Instead of just holing up with our usual circle of friends this winter, we might sign on to take part in the cathedral's Chicago Dinner Dialogue project, where we can sit down to get to know some people whose life experience is a bit different from our own. Even small detours like these can be statements of hope and healing in our broken and troubled world, statements about the endless capacity for transformation and redirection that lies within each one of us. This is actually the very thing we commit ourselves to at baptism—we commit ourselves to being people who are relentlessly open to the life altering, direction shifting movement of the Holy Spirit. *Will you persevere in resisting evil? we are asked each time we witness a baptism. Will you persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?*

I don't have to tell you how desperately our world is in need of people willing to try to make good on this vow, this vow to recognize when we have taken a wrong turn and need to re-chart our course. We live in a time when many feel that our society is in a kind of death spiral, that there is nothing that can save us from the selfishness, deceit, greed, corruption, and what my grandmother used to call “just plain ugliness” that seem to have taken hold. This is the way the Herods of the world want us to feel. Helpless. Hopeless. Despondent. Trapped on a path to nowhere. And yet the great Good News of Christmas is that nothing could be farther from the truth! We are not trapped. We have not come to a dead end. Remember those hapless shepherds on Christmas Eve—the ones who are just trying to get through another night guarding a herd of dirty, stupid sheep? More than half of these guys are about to nod off to sleep, when, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, comes an angel of the Lord. And the shepherds are terrified. Nobody moves a muscle, everyone's rooted to their spot. But then the angel reassures them, *Do not be afraid. Instead, Go! Go to Bethlehem and see. Throw down your staffs and hit the road. Do not be afraid.* This is not just a message of comfort, it is a message of empowerment. A message intended to remind the shepherd and the wise man or woman in each one of us that is never too late to begin a new journey, never too late to make our way home by a braver, truer, more life-giving path than the one we have walked thus far.

And so the question for each of us as we come to the end of Christmas and celebrate this Feast of the Epiphany—the question for each of us is a simple but demanding one: Will you and I be among the wise wanderers of our world? Will we be people who follow strange stars and pay attention to unlikely dreams?

If we do this—if we recalibrate our lives according to the divine GPS and allow ourselves to be steered away from the nightmare of Herod towards the dream of God, then our days may often be strange and complicated, but they will never be dull. They will be filled with meaning, purpose, and adventure. They will be marked by joy, hope, and wonder. What more could we ask for for these little ones we baptize this morning?

“He is the Way,” W. H. Auden concludes his poem “For the Time Being:”

*He is the Way. Follow him in the land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.
He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.
He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

Amen.