

John Sampson
"A Different Way Home"
Text: Matthew 2:1 - 12
Preached at KVCC
January 5, 2020

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Merry Christmas!

Yes, we are still in the Christmas season, because Christmas is not just a single day, but a season of twelve days. And really, although we've come to the end of our celebration, God asks us to keep our hearts open for the rest of our lives, so that love, the love of God With Us, may be born again, and again.

And it's been a journey hasn't it?

Think about where this all started.

It began that Sunday right after Thanksgiving, when we took the first steps on our journey of Advent, a season that is crafted to prepare God's children for the coming of Love. It began when we lit the first candle of our Advent wreath, and sang Prepare the Way of the Lord as our response to this first manifestation of light. We tolled the church bells, and I asked you to awaken to the places in your life, and in the world, where love needed to be born

We followed this the next week by a ritual washing away of the pieces of our lives that might inhibit Love's coming. Love's gestation within our spiritual bodies could be compared to a woman carrying a child, and so on the third Sunday of Advent we heard Mary's hymn of joy to God, and the hymns of joy and challenge from three of our members about their own pregnancies. We concluded the season of Advent, our time of preparation, with a joyful retelling of the story of Christmas in our pageant, *What the Shepherds Saw*.

Each of these steps brought us closer to the manger, to the spiritual moment of God's birth among us once again in the form of a baby, of a boy named Jesus, of the one we will come to call the Christ. In hearing the story of the shepherds we saw what a meeting with the Christ child did to those rude and smelly men. And our spiritual ancestors ask us, what will the coming to the manger, what will coming into contact with God's presence in our world, what will the coming of Love do to you, and to me, to all of us?

In today's story of the magi, of the sacred magicians from the East, we are asked again, what will this meeting with God's presence do to us. How will it change us? And if a change does come over us it may look like giving gifts, and worshipping just like we're told those magicians did in our story. That gift giving and worshipping is so central to our understanding of what a response to Love might look like that we even acted out here this morning with the arrival of our own wise people from Keene, and Bloomingdale.

But when I reread our story recently I wasn't as struck by the gifts and the worshipping as I was by the very ending of the passage. There, the writers of Matthew tell us that the magi were warned in a dream and returned home by a different road. They were warned not by their learning, and not by their training, but by a truth welling up from their non-conscious selves that to return to Herod, to return to Jerusalem, to return to the center of political and spiritual power of the land, would have been dangerous, not only for the baby they had met, but perhaps even for themselves.

Don't go back the way you came. Return to your homes by a different way.

Because you have been to the manger. You have been to the birthplace of Love. Don't put Love in jeopardy by exposing it to the powers that want to control it, and fear it. Don't put your own experience of meeting Love and Presence in danger by engaging with the politics of violence and division.

Because you, and I have been to the manger.

Let us take another road home.

If I had the opportunity to take another road home today, a road informed by Love and by Presence, it would be the most round about way. I wouldn't simply walk across the street, but I'd get in my car and I'd head south. Down the thruway, past Albany, across the Hudson over the new Tappan Zee Bridge, down the Henry Hudson and right into New York City. My way home would bring me to lower Manhattan and I would join with our Jewish brothers and sisters, I would join people of all religious backgrounds, and no religious background, I would join the Solidarity March, which is happening this afternoon.

The Solidarity March was organized in response to the stabbings that occurred during a gathering of Jewish people celebrating Hanukkah. As the group was about to light the next candle in the menorah a man entered the house they were in and proceeded to strike those who were attending with a machete. This didn't happen somewhere far away from us. It happened right here in New York state.

And although the Hanukkah attack might have been the trigger for the Solidarity March, it is just one more anti-Semitic attack in a nation that is experiencing these kinds of attacks in increasing frequency.

My way home today would be different if I weren't here with you, and with God's spirit, because the anti-Semitic attacks we're experiencing across our nation aren't a Jewish

problem. Jewish people are the victims. The problem is with the non-Jewish people who commit such evil, or allow such evil, or don't call out such evil. Today my trip home wouldn't take me simply across the street to Sunny Jim, it would bring me across the Brooklyn Bridge with thousands of others to say I stand with my Jewish brothers and sisters, and to kill them, and intimidate them, to dehumanize them and spit on them is to do all of these things to that Jewish baby who was born in a manger and who is Love itself. It is to do all of these things to the one we may come to call the Christ.

We can't go back along the road we have already traveled. Because if we do we will end up among the politics and power structures that allow anti-Semitism to breed and to metastasize. We will end up among those who love their own power, and are OK with others dying to keep it. We can't go back the way we came because our history doesn't allow it. Love, true love, doesn't allow it. Not today, and not any day in the future.

This is what Christmas looks like. It looks like a journey that doesn't go backwards. It looks like a journey that moves forward to a new future that isn't simply a replication of the past. It looks like a journey that has been completely altered by an experience at the manger. It looks like a journey altered by Love.

This is what Christmas looks like.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.