

“Home By Another Way”

Matthew 2:1-12

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I can't help but be moved by so many of the Bible stories. Whether they are historically accurate or not, they contain truths we need for the living of our daily lives. The Epiphany story is one of these. I am moved by the Magi noticing a star in the heavens that had never appeared before. I am moved that they were moved! I am moved by their journey to follow the star, not knowing where it would lead; just that they knew in their bones that nothing else mattered. I am moved that they brought precious gifts, symbols of the Christ child's life. And, I am moved that an angel visits them and urges them to return home by another way, not returning via the ill-intentioned King Herod.

It strikes me that anyone having an encounter with Christ would return home via a different route, having been changed in some remarkable way. That's the way it is with Jesus. We meet him in prayer. We meet him in a dream. We meet him in the Bible. We meet him in our encounters with fellow human beings. We meet him and we just can't return home the way we came. We choose, instead, a more excellent way.

At the Smith College Museum of Art in Northampton, there is an awesome painting of Jesus by Michelangelo Caravaggio. It's up on the third floor. I can never just walk past it. It halts me in my tracks every time. The theology of the artist comes through in the way the eyes are painted. Jesus is looking out of the canvas right at me. He seems to be saying, "I know exactly how you feel."

When I view this work of art, I know I can't go back to Glastonbury via the same route. When I view this work, I know I need to slow down and pay more attention to what is on the hearts of the people I meet each day. This encounter with Jesus is more than a subtle reminder that human beings yearn for someone to know them completely, for someone to take the time to listen to what they carry in their hearts. Instead of 91 South, I take Route 10. It requires me to slow down, to pay closer attention to the worry and the heartbreak of this world. I think of the painting as an Epiphany.

Most of you know I like movies with a spiritual content. High on my list of favorites is "Places in the Heart." Set in a small Texas town in the 1920's, the story reveals the separation of blacks and whites, people with power from people without power, people who live on the land from those who live in town. There is violence in this film, the kind of violence that leaves communities and families divided and hostile and seemingly forever suspicious. Yet, in the final scene, the movie director takes us to the little church on the edge of town. It's a Communion Sunday. The choir is singing "Blessed Assurance." And as the Sacrament is passed among the pews, and words of peace are whispered, we see an image of the Kingdom of God. Both races are there, black and white together. Rich and poor are there. Violators and victims are there. There are no distinctions. All are neighbors. Love has transcended all the brokenness. I can only imagine those worshippers, after the benediction, going home by a different way.

I try to watch this film once a year. For me, it's a Jesus encounter. When I view that closing scene, I know I must work harder at connecting with people different from me. I know I must work harder to dissolve any remnant of prejudice in my heart. I know I must work harder at seeing the divinity in everyone I meet.

After viewing Places in the Heart here in the social hall, I go home via Foote Road to Matson Hill to Woodland Street to Cold Brook Road to Country Club Road to Wassuc Road. I think of this movie as an Epiphany.

Last Sunday, I mentioned my recent 6 mile trek from South Church up Still Hill and through my boyhood neighborhood. I made it as far as the Portland line and then up Kimberley Lane to Dayton Road and back down Main Street. Along the way, I discovered six kinds of whiskey bottles, nine kinds of beer cans, seven kinds of candy bar wrappers, and a role of duct tape. These little treasures caused me to reflect on my own stewardship of the earth, how I, personally, regard or disregard the earth. As I reached 360 Main Street, I saw a man retrieving his blue, recycling bin from the curb. It was a kind of Epiphany, a wake up call, a Jesus moment.

If you've been with me at a cemetery or in our own memorial garden for a burial ritual, you've likely heard me say, "we are standing on holy ground." What I've come to understand is that all the ground, the whole planet, is holy; a gift to us from our Creator. Churches are asked to take the lead in stewardship of the earth. We are asked to take the lead by recycling properly and by using water carefully and by spreading organic products on our lawn, and by countless other strategies that acknowledge the ground is sacred, a gift from the Almighty One. I'm thinking I might walk the four miles home today, or maybe carpool. Or, at the very least, get lots more creative about ways to contribute to the earth's fertility. I'd like to think the Magi would smile at that.

I loved watching our church children at the 5:00 p.m. Christmas Eve worship service act out the arrival of the wise men at the stable. I saw that they departed by a different aisle.

The invitation today is to see ourselves in that Epiphany story, having a Christ encounter, realizing it has changed us, then following a different path, the path of unconditional love. When we're on that path, we're living in the greatest of hope. Amen.