

Matthew 2:13-15
December 26, '10

“NOW WHAT?”

COUNTLESS INDIVIDUALS HAVE OFFERED THEIR OWN FOLLOW-UP TO CLEMENT MOORE’S “VISIT FROM ST. NICHOLAS” WITH “’T WAS THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.”

SINCE THIS IS, IN FACT, THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, I’D LIKE TO SHARE ONE THAT I THINK THAT IS PARTICULARLY WELL-WRITTEN & VERY APPROPRIATE FOR THE DAY.

IT WAS WRITTEN BY THE REVEREND KEN GOODRICH – A MINISTER IN VIRGINIA.

*Twas the day after Christmas, when all through the town
Every creature was stirring, taking ornaments down.
The lights were extinguished, the candles all burned,
Empty boxes abounded wherever you turned.*

*The children were cranky, they'd been good for so long
That their innards were bursting to do something wrong;
The toys of which visions had danced in their heads
Lay abandoned in corners, their batteries dead.*

*When you sprang to the window and threw open the sash,
Your eyes were assaulted by mountains of trash.
So it's back to the office, to the matters at hand,
As relief, like an aspirin, spread through the land,*

*And the windows, in outlines of colors once bright,
Now returned to dark shadows, as black as the night.
The fires of warm feelings were beginning to wane,
Like the hard, icy touch of a cold windowpane*

*As the world, like the dread of an overcast day,
Reverted to form, to its patterns of gray,
When what in our wondering ears should we hear,
But the Word of the Father to be of good cheer;*

*To take hold of the light that will never go out,
And carry it high, and spread it about.
Throw the holly and ivy out if you will,
But the star is before you. Follow it still.*

*The wonder of Christmas, of God coming here,
Cannot be confined to the end of the year,*

*For the light of the manger, which is now packed away,
Continues to shine and glows brighter each day
As the people of God respond to his call,
And take this, the true meaning of Christmas to all:
Friends, the glory of God neither falters nor ends,
For the gift of the presence comes again...and again.*

HERE WE ARE ON THE DAY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

LITTLE MORE THAN A DAY & A HALF AGO, I SUGGESTED THAT THE CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICE IS REALLY A “WHEW” EXPERIENCE.

“WHEW” BECAUSE MOST OF THE HECTIC ACTIVITY IS OVER.

I OFFERED THAT QUALIFIER “MOST” BECAUSE FOR MANY OF YOU THERE WAS STILL WORK TO BE DONE.

BUT TODAY – TODAY REALLY IS A NEARLY COMPLETE “WHEW,” ISN'T IT?

NOW IT REALLY IS OVER, ISN'T IT?

CHRISTMAS HAS COME & GONE FOR ANOTHER YEAR.

THOSE RADIO STATIONS PLAYING 24/7 CHRISTMAS MUSIC?

NOT DOING IT ANYMORE.

THOSE NON-STOP TELEVISION CHRISTMAS SPECIALS?

THEY'RE OVER.

EVEN THE SALVATION ARMY KETTLES HAVE DISAPPEARED.

NOW BEGINS THE CHRISTMAS AFTERMATH.

SOON THE TREES WILL BE LYING LIFELESS AT THE CURB OR STOWED AWAY IN THE BASEMENT OR ATTIC.

THE ORNAMENTS & DECORATIONS WILL BE PACKED NEATLY AWAY.

LINES BEGAN FORMING EARLY THIS MORNING, I'M SURE, TO RETURN THOSE UNWANTED OR DUPLICATED GIFTS.

YES, THE AFTERMATH HAS BEGUN.

ISN'T IT ALWAYS MORE FUN TAKING THE DECORATIONS OUT & PUTTING THEM UP THAN TAKING THEM DOWN & PUTTING THEM AWAY?

THERE'S ONE THAT ALWAYS TROUBLES ME MORE THAN OTHERS.

I ALWAYS FEEL A LITTLE “SCROOGY” OR “GRINCHY” WHEN I TAKE OUR LARGE STUFFED SANTA, MRS. CLAUS & RUDOLF & CRAM ALL THREE OF THEM INTO A RUBBERMAID CHRISTMAS TUB & CLOSE THE LID.

IT JUST FEELS WRONG.

HERE WE'VE MADE THEM COME TO LIFE OVER THE PAST SEVERAL WEEKS, PUTTING THEM IN VARIOUS PLACES & POSITIONS & HAVING THEM POSE FOR PICTURES WITH FAMILY & FRIENDS.

AND NOW THEY'RE EXILED TO A DARK, CRAMPED, RUBBER TOMB FOR ANOTHER YEAR.

IT'S ALL PART OF THE CHRISTMAS AFTERMATH, THOUGH.

THESE VERSES WE'VE READ FROM MATTHEW'S GOSPEL THIS MORNING ARE THE LECTIONARY READING FOR TODAY – WELL, PART OF THE LECTIONARY READING.

THE ENTIRE READING INCLUDED THE NEXT 8 VERSES WHICH TELL THE GRUESOME STORY WHAT WE HAVE COME TO KNOW AS “THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS.”

THAT SEEMED, TO ME, TO BE *TOO* DRASTIC A CHANGE FROM ONE DAY TO THE NEXT.

AND YET, LIFE CAN CHANGE THAT QUICKLY, CAN'T IT?

“*GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST*” CAN DIVE TO A LOW POINT IN LESS THAN A HUMAN HEARTBEAT.

THE HOLY FAMILY WASN'T GIVEN THE LUXURY OF “*SLEEPING IN HEAVENLY PEACE*” FOR VERY LONG.

THE FLUTTER OF ANGELS' WINGS IN JOSEPH'S DREAMS WARNED OF AN EVIL TYRANT ON THE LOOSE GOING DOOR-TO-DOOR LOOKING FOR BABIES TO KILL.

ONCE CHRISTMAS IS OVER, WE ASK, “NOW WHAT?”

IN ONE SENSE, IT'S NICE, ISN'T IT, TO HAVE THINGS SLOW DOWN & HAVE LIFE RETURN TO SOME SEMBLANCE OF NORMALCY.

BUT IN ANOTHER SENSE, IT FEELS A BIT SAD, DOESN'T IT, THAT ALL THE EXCITEMENT HAS TO COME TO AN END.

WE'RE LIKE CHILDREN WHO, HAVING SPENT RECENT WEEKS LEADING UP TO CHRISTMAS, TRY TO BE AS GOOD AS THEY CAN BE SO THAT SANTA WILL HANDSOMELY REWARD THEM FOR THEIR IMPECCABLE BEHAVIOR.

IT'S OVER NOW, THOUGH, AND JUST AS CHILDREN DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING ON THEIR BEST BEHAVIOR UNTIL THE SANTA SEASON ROLLS AROUND AGAIN, NEITHER DO THE REST OF US.

WE CAN REVERT BACK TO BEING COLD & CUNNING & CALCULATING.

BUT THAT'S THE REAL WORLD, ISN'T IT?

IT'S A COLD, CUNNING & CALCULATING WORLD IN WHICH WE LIVE.

AND THIS ISN'T SOMETHING NEW – THIS UTTER & TOTAL REVERSAL IMMEDIATELY AFTER CHRISTMAS.

THINK OF THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS FOR MARY, JOSEPH & JESUS.

NO SOONER HAD THE SHEPHERDS LEFT THE STABLE THAN JOSEPH HAD ANOTHER DREAM THAT TOLD HIM THAT THE FUN & FRIVOLITY WAS OVER.

“*GET MOVING BECAUSE THE COLD, CUNNING & CALCULATING WORLD IS OUT TO GET YOU.*”

SO THE SUDDEN SHIFT IN MOOD ISN'T NEW.

IT'S ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY IN THE PAST.

BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT HAS TO CONTINUE TO BE THAT WAY.

THE “GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE” THAT THE ANGEL ANNOUNCED TO THE SHEPHERDS DOESN'T HAVE TO END JUST BECAUSE OUR OBSERVANCE OF THE ACTUAL EVENT HAS ENDED.

WILLIAM BARCLAY REMINDS US OF TWO BEAUTIFUL LEGENDS THAT ARE CONNECTED TO THE FLIGHT OF MARY, JOSEPH & JESUS INTO EGYPT.

THE FIRST IS A LEGEND ABOUT THE PENITENT THIEF.

LEGEND CALLS HIM DISMAS, AND TELLS THAT HE DIDN'T MEET JESUS FOR THE FIRST TIME WHEN THEY BOTH HUNG ON THEIR CROSSES ON CALVARY.

THE STORY RUNS LIKE THIS.

WHEN JOSEPH, MARY & JESUS WERE ON THEIR WAY TO EGYPT, THEY WERE ATTACKED BY ROBBERS.

ONE OF THE LEADERS WANTED TO KILL ALL THREE OF THEM & STEAL WHAT THEY HAD.

BUT SOMETHING ABOUT THE BABY JESUS WENT STRAIGHT TO HEART OF ONE OF THE OTHER LEADERS – A MAN NAMED DISMAS.

HE REFUSED TO ALLOW ANY HARM TO COME TO JESUS OR HIS PARENTS.

HE LOOKED AT JESUS & SAID, *“O MOST BLESSED OF CHILDREN, IF EVER THERE COME A TIME FOR HAVING MERCY ON ME, THEN REMEMBER ME, AND FORGET NOT THIS HOUR.”*

SO, THE LEGEND SAYS, JESUS & DISMAS *DID* MEET AGAIN AT CALVARY, AND DISMAS ON THE CROSS FOUND FORGIVENESS & MERCY FOR HIS SOUL.

GRANTING & RECEIVING MERCY & FORGIVENESS ARE GIFTS THAT SHOULD NEVER BE CONFINED TO A SPECIAL TIME OR A PARTICULAR SEASON.

THE OTHER LEGEND SAYS THAT WHEN MARY, JOSEPH & JESUS WERE ON THEIR WAY TO EYGPY, THEY SOUGHT REFUGE IN A CAVE ONE NIGHT.

IT WAS VERY COLD – SO COLD THAT THE GROUND WAS COVERED WITH FROST.

A LITTLE SPIDER SAW THE LITTLE BABY JESUS & AND HE WANTED SO MUCH TO DO SOMETHING FOR HIM TO KEEP HIM WARM DURING THE COLD NIGHT.

HE DECIDED TO DO THE ONLY THING HE *COULD* DO & THAT IS TO SPIN A WEB ACROSS THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAVE, TO MAKE A CURTAIN AGAINST THE COLD WIND.

ALONG THE PATH OF THE CAVE CAME A DETACHMENT OF HEROD'S SOLDIERS TO CARRY OUT HIS ORDER TO KILL THE MALE CHILDREN.

WHEN THEY CAME TO THE CAVE THEY WERE ABOUT TO BURST IN TO SEARCH IT TO SEE IF ANYONE WAS HIDING THERE.

BUT THEIR CAPTAIN NOTICED THE SPIDER'S WEB.

HE SAID, *“DON'T BOTHER SEARCHING THE CAVE. THERE'S NO ONE INSIDE BECAUSE IF THEY'D TRIED TO ENTER IT, THEY WOULD HAVE BROKEN THAT SPIDER'S WEB.”*

SO THE SOLDIERS PASSED ON AND LEFT THE HOLY FAMILY IN PEACE, ALL BECAUSE A LITTLE SPIDER HAD SPUN HIS WEB ACROSS THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAVE IN AN EFFORT TO KEEP THE CHRIST CHILD WARM.

THE LEGEND SAYS THAT'S THE REASON THAT PEOPLE ONCE (AND SOME EVEN TODAY) USE TINSEL ON THEIR CHRISTMAS TREES.

IT'S A REMINDER OF THAT SPIDER'S WEB, SILVER WITH THE FROST, STRETCHED ACROSS THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAVE ON THE ROAD TO EGYPT.

IT'S A REMINDER THAT EVEN THE SMALLEST OF GIFTS THAT WE GIVE TO CHRIST WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

THE TIME FOR HONORING & GIVING TO CHRIST ISN'T TIED TO A SPECIAL TIME OR A PARTICULAR SEASON.

SO THE QUESTION REMAINS, "NOW WHAT? WHAT DO WE DO NOW THAT CHRISTMAS IS OVER?"

WHY NOT LET IT CONTINUE – CONTINUE ON INTO THE NEW YEAR & LIVE ON IN OUR LIVES.

WHY NOT DEFY THIS COLD, CUNNING & CALCULATING WORLD BY LIVING IN A SPIRIT OF LOVE, PEACE, GENEROSITY & COMPASSION EVERY DAY?

DO YOU REMEMBER HOW WE BEGAN THE SEASON OF ADVENT THIS YEAR?

WE BEGAN WITH DEREK CHALLENGING US ON THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT TO START MOVING CHRISTMAS BACK EVEN FURTHER THAN THE MERCHANTS AND TELEVISION & RADIO PEOPLE HAVE TRIED TO DO.

HIS CHALLENGE WAS TO, NEXT YEAR, TAKE SEPTEMBER.

WHY NOT DO THE OPPOSITE AS WELL.

LET'S NOT JUST MOVE IT BACK.

LET'S MOVE IT AHEAD.

LET'S NOT JUST MAKE IT START EARLIER.

LET'S MAKE IT LAST LONGER.

LET'S BOOKEND THIS ADVENT SEASON BY FINISHING WHERE WE BEGAN.

WE STARTED THE SEASON BY SINGING "GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN."

LET'S FINISH IT THE SAME WAY – BEING CHALLENGED TO "GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN, OVER THE HILLS & EVERYWHERE" – TO TELL THE WORLD THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY TO ALL THE PEOPLE THAT "JESUS CHRIST IS BORN" BORN NOT FOR A SEASON - BUT FOR A LIFETIME. AMEN.

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