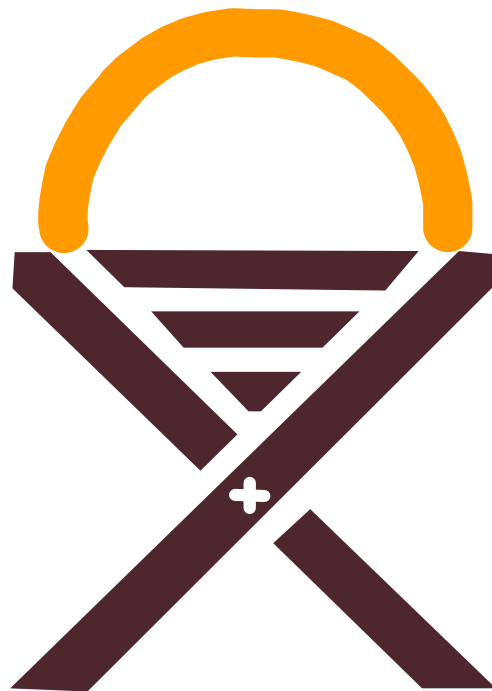


Peering into the Manger



Devotions for the
Season of Advent

written by
M. Rick Hendricks

for
First Christian Church
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Foreword

The different seasons of the church year afford us unique opportunities to rediscover the scriptures and to spend time in contemplation of them, and of the meaning they continue to have in our lives.

Advent is the season in which we prepare for the coming of Christ into the world. Each of us comes to that event with our own set of beliefs and each of us relates to that event in ways that are meaningful and powerful for us.

As I looked at Advent this year, I began to be aware of faces that floated in and out of my consciousness. Faces of those who might have come to the manger, bringing with them the baggage of who they were, and witnessing the birth of Jesus, each in their own way and from the perspective of their own experience.

They serve as symbols for us of the many ways and the many directions from which we, ourselves, might come to this place and of the different meanings this event can have for us at different moments in our own lives and in our faith.

One of my favorite Christmas poems is G. K. Chesterton's *The House of Christmas*, in which he shares:

*...That crazy stable, close at hand,
with shaking timbers and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger place to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.*

*For men are homesick in their homes
and strangers under the sun
And they lay their heads in a foreign land
whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes
and chance and honor and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
where the yule-tale was begun...*

In our contemplations around the manger we will meet some of the people and share some of their experiences as they peer into the manger.

Some of them might have actually been present. Others might be part of the ancient past but who stand in the heritage of faith, and therefore have something to say about this particular birth.

We will, each Sunday, hear a word from one of the prophets whose words are interpreted to have something to say about what God was doing in the world, the culmination of which meets us in Jesus.

And we will also hear about five different women whose names are mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus recorded in Matthew, and wonder together why those names were important enough to Matthew to be included.

I invite you to share with me as we peer into the faces of those who peer into the manger, and read with me the meaning that we might find there.

Have You Not Heard?

The prophetic word in scripture is a sometimes strange and often misunderstood word. Too often we think of prophecy as foretelling the future, when, in fact, the word of prophecy is meant as a proclamation of God speaking to a specific moment and offering a challenge to live as people of God while outlining some of the consequences that can occur if that word is ignored or dismissed.

But, the Word of God, to those of us who take it seriously, is also a living word; which means that it cannot be confined to one time, or one people, but speaks to us in all times and to all people, in all situations.

So what a person hears from that word in one moment may be heard entirely differently when spoken in a different moment and under new circumstances.

Isaiah 40 was spoken to a people in exile in Babylon. It offers to them a word of hope for deliverance from their grief and a promise of the faithfulness of God who has not forgotten them. A God who has remained with them in their anguish and offers them hope for a better day if they will only trust and follow, living out of the unconditional love of God in relationship to the world and one another.

After the events of Easter, the early church heard in that old prophetic word a new context. They heard in that ancient promise a word which pointed beyond that limited circumstance to a new covenant which had been fulfilled in the gift of Christ and which called them to be faithful as God has been faithful to us.

That same word - that living word - still speaks with power and promise today. It calls us to remember that, in Jesus Christ, God has spoken to all time and places and speaks to us today, calling us to lean on the strength we have in faith and live into the promise of an unbounded future.

*They who wait for the Lord
shall renew their strength
They shall rise up on wings
as eagles ~*

Humble Handmaiden

Probably, the first face Jesus would have seen in this earthly life was that of his mother.

A young face. Barely more than a teenager. A face still wet with sweat and weary from the process of what could not have been an easy birth. I'm sure births took place in manger stalls often. But for a young girl separated from her family and in a strange town, following a long journey, there was probably a lot of anxiety involved.

Perhaps the innkeepers wife or another who could serve as mid-wife had been called to help. I hope so. It is often the kindness of strangers that helps to make better, otherwise, bad situations.

Sometimes, I think, God surprises us with opportunities that we would surely never imagine for ourselves. Often we might be given the chance to move outside the carefully circumscribed zones of comfort in order to serve the kingdom and perhaps care for some of the least of these.

This summer a group of our youth received the chance to go to Jamaica on a mission trip. To those who think that nothing could be more ideal or frivolous, all I can say is that you'll probably never be called to face a more desperate situation than those with whom our youth worked with in the 'poor house', a state-run infirmary for the poorest of the poor.

Seeing our children rising to the task, seeing them sitting with, caring for, relating to, these people who barely existed in that place, moved me often to tears. They fed them, sometimes bathed them, sang with them, listened to them, loved them.

I could not help but reflect on the words of Mary, when, after her initial shock, responded to God's call with...

"Here I am, the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."

May we all, when called upon to do the work of the kingdom, be as that humble handmaid.

Power Mad Despot

History calls him “Herod the Great” and he is remembered for establishing a rule in Judea free from war and able to grow in wealth and stature eclipsed only by that achieved under David and Solomon.

But, his was a costly peace and a prosperity that depended on alliances with Rome that, though protecting the Jewish population, also depended on their unwavering allegiance enforced with swift and brutal punishment.

His family were among the conquered Idumaeans who had been forced to accept Judaism following defeat. But, like his father, Herod was a political chameleon who changed loyalties easily and used every event to further his own power hungry ambitions.

His rule lasted 33 years and his massive building program resulted in some of the most magnificent structures of the ancient world, including the temple built to accommodate worship of his ‘adopted’ God. His most notable characteristic was his brutality and his tendency to guard his own position by eliminating anyone from whom he felt a threat - either real or imagined.

He murdered his mother-in-law and his brother-in-law because he perceived them to be too popular with the people. He had his own wife convicted of treason and killed. And, of course, according to Matthew, went after Jesus because some astronomers wrongly identified the newly born baby as a possible successor, a new “King of the Jews” - which was Herod’s own title.

Luckily he never found the place where Jesus lived. Unluckily for many others, his rage resulted in wholesale slaughter of innocent children.

Isn’t it interesting that the human tendency is often to try to destroy that which we do not understand. From prejudice to genocide is too often far too short a trip.

May God guard us from ourselves and teach us the way of love instead.

Doubt-filled Witness

There have been times in my life - few and far between to be sure - when I have been left speechless by events taking place. I know it is hard to believe!

The birth of my daughters, each so amazing in its own way, left me unable to utter a word for a precious few moments.

The death of good friends sometimes impacts me in such a way as to leave me bereft of words.

Sometimes witnessing great tragedy or extreme poverty or unbelievable cruelty zaps me of the strength to utter a sound; leaving it to my tears to communicate my feelings.

Zechariah, was one of the priests whose service to the temple took them into the most sacred space. Now, we know from other accounts of those who frequented the 'holy ground' that these have been times of vision or calling. I think of Isaiah and his vision of God or of the boy Samuel and his call to service.

Zechariah got some good news from one of the messengers of God. His wife, Elizabeth, barren till now, would bare a son. Zechariah evidently wasn't ready to believe that his wife and himself were worthy to join the ranks of Abram and Sara, or Hannah. He, in essence, said to Gabriel — "No way!"

So, to help him have the time to assimilate the news, he was struck dumb for a while, unable to speak.

When John was born he was finally able to express his joy and all that pent-up emotion broke out in to a song of thanksgiving and a prophesy of the coming of the Messiah.

We aren't told whether Elizabeth enjoyed the quiet she had experienced up to that point.

Zechariah was a doubter turned witness, and does not serve as a warning to us, but rather as a sign of the love of God which is far wider than our doubts and which takes us in, anyway.

Reluctant Supporter

If he has had a good relationship with his own father, every man looks forward to a time of sharing life with a son. You imagine teaching him the lessons that he will need in life to survive and thrive. Many may even imagine their son following in their footsteps and taking up in business where you leave off. You imagine them grown and you want them to be persons of whom one can be proud.

In the Jewish, as in other, societies, sons were the promise for the future. Sons insured that the heritage would go forward and the name be carried into the distant unknown.

But, you had to have proof that the child was your own and there were strict laws against those who broke that covenant. Read through the twenty-second chapter of Deuteronomy to see the consequences for the woman who destroyed the sacredness of the family bed.

Joseph had a dilemma. Mary was pregnant. He was well within his rights to have her publically humiliated and stoned to death. But Joseph was a compassionate man who determined that he would quietly annul the marriage contract and let it go at that.

But, a messenger of God convinced him that this child would need a father like him to guide him and to love him as if he were his own.

A lesser man might have said 'no'. But Joseph was not a lesser man.

He accepted the situation. He supported Mary, and, by his acceptance made the unspoken vow to be to Jesus the kind of father that would allow him to grow into the man he needed to be.

We could learn much from Joseph about embracing circumstance and living faithfully, even when it might be difficult to do so.

You can certainly imagine an awe-struck pride in the face of Joseph as he peered into the manger.

Patient Seeker

Everyone around the temple in Jerusalem knew Simeon. He was a constant there. One of those who was always in his place for prayer. His diligence at the temple was such that if you didn't see him, then you knew that something must be very wrong.

They knew the content of his prayers as well. He made no secret of it. He was waiting. Waiting to see the Messiah. His vision was wider than others however, for in his mind the Messiah would be far more than just the serving of the nation. In his mind the Messiah would transcend national politics and religion to be the savior of all. Savior for the world.

He was probably a joke to many who scoffed at his fervent hope, labeling it the pipe-dream of an old fool.

Indeed, perhaps he even bothered some, by insisting to look into the face of every child brought in for ritual blessing.

When Mary and Joseph came to offer the purification sacrifice after Jesus was born, the old man peered intensely into the child's face.

Suddenly there was a change and the old eyes watered with unexpected joy.

"Now, O God, I can go to the grave in peace, for I have seen the savior."

It was another of those things about Jesus which Mary would keep and ponder.

Sometimes it takes a long time for hope to be realized. But when it comes you realize that it was worth the wait. Witness the tears of joy on the faces of African Americans, and others around the world, at the inauguration of Barrack Obama.

Sometimes joy comes to those who are willing to work and wait in the face of all odds.

Sometimes salvation comes, and all we can do is say *"Thank you, God."*

Desperate Innocent

When a woman married into a family, she ceased to be the daughter of her parents. Her fate rested then, with the treatment she would receive from her husband's family. Birthright and security for a woman depended on bearing children who would inherit from the estate. Without this inheritance a woman had no resources for care in her old age.

If a man died before a child was born, the woman was given to a brother as a wife. This ensured that the woman could still bear a child and so still have a secure future.

Tamar's husband died. His brother, Onan, did not want to share his inheritance with his brother's wife and refused his duty.

When he too died, Tamar was told that the youngest son of Judah would be her new husband when he came of age. But time had passed, the boy had come of age, but had shown no interest in fulfilling the promise.

Desperate for her future, Tamar decided that her only way out was to seduce her own father-in-law. Which she did, posing as a prostitute and becoming pregnant by him. She confronted him with proof of her claim on him. When Judah realized what he had done, he was ashamed of his treatment of her and welcomed her sons as his own.

What a sorted story to include in the lineage of Jesus, the Savior of the world. Though he had to include the names of the sons, Matthew goes out of his way to remind people that Tamar was the mother. Why would he do that?

Of course we do not know.

But as I see this story, I see the face of one who was driven by her despair to do something she would never have thought. This desperate innocent reminds me that the love of God reaches out to those who seem to have no recourse and encircles them within the endless boundaries of grace.

In God's amazing grace, no one is left behind; even those who come to God only out of desperation.

A Big Little Town

It didn't have much going for it. A little town in the middle of nowhere. No great temple. No amazing landmarks to set it apart from all those other little places which were not much bigger than an oasis in the desert.

But, Bethlehem had one thing going for it. It was the ancestral home of David. The great king in Israel and Judah. David was the example, held up by everyone, of the kind of ruler Israel needed. As in all great leaders he was, in the eyes of history, the plumb line against which all rulers were measured and none, so far, had measured up.

But people had hope. Hope that a new David would arise. One who would bind up the brokenness of the kingdom and restore Israel to the greatness that had been theirs before all the conquerors rolled over them.

And where else would this leader be born? He had to partake of David's line. He would surely be born in David's own city. Bethlehem - *the house of bread*.

No wonder the ancient astronomers following the star surmised that the one they sought must be in Bethlehem.

They were right of course. And they were wrong. Because the kingdom that Jesus would grow to proclaim was so much more than an earthly empire.

Later the little town would put up a new sign at its entrance, beside the one that read:

Birthplace of David the King of the Jews –

The new sign would read:

Birthplace of Jesus the savior of the world.

Not bad for a "little town."

Trusted Confidant

Everyone needs a friend. Someone you can trust. Someone with whom you can be yourself without worrying whether or not they will accept you. Someone with whom you can share your deepest fears or hopes, confident that they will not dismiss them or think you a fool.

Mary needed her cousin. She needed the calm assurance of one who was older and who could help Mary feel more comfortable about the expectations, the joys, and the pitfalls of marriage. And, since Elizabeth, too, was pregnant, someone with whom to share her own fears about the events to come.

It is interesting to note that the scripture has the first acknowledgment of Jesus' lordship declared by a woman. Months before the angel songs and the visits of the wise men; years before Peter's brash confession that Jesus is 'the Christ of God!', Elizabeth recognizes and proclaims Jesus 'my Lord.'

We do not have any insight into the conversations they had in the months that followed, but we know that when Mary returned from her stay with Elizabeth, she was evidently ready to assume her role in the overall plan of God.

When her own child was born, Elizabeth helped him to grow into a man who was not satisfied to let the world be turned over to those hungry for power, but stood up to declare as one of the prophets of old his confidence in the coming kingdom of God.

A confidence perhaps born of the assurances of a mother who had seen promise fulfilled in the birth of her own child.

Even before others came to peer into the manger, Elizabeth knew that the child to be born of Mary was one worthy of more than most would ever imagine.

Call a friend this week just to tell them how glad you are to have a friend such as they.

Harried Helper

The Christmas pageant was going amazingly well. All the children had seemed to be so caught up in the story that none had made any serious goofs on their lines. Indeed, they seemed to be immersed in the mystery. The little Mary looked genuinely exhausted. The little Joseph seemed to have a genuine concern for his obviously pregnant wife.

Even the little innkeeper, when he opened the door, to their desperate knock, seemed genuinely harried and out of sorts, turning the young couple away with the loud declaration “*We’ve got no room.*”

Joseph looked pleadingly. Mary seemed on the verge of tears. They turned sadly from the door. The little innkeeper watched them for a moment as though unsure what to do. Then, overcome by the scene before him, he threw open the door to declare to the young couple –

“*Wait. You can have my room!*”

And no one laughed.

And everyone agreed it was the best Christmas pageant ever.

Finding room in an inn during a time of census would have been tough. And it couldn’t be just any room, for Mary was already in the pain of labor. All the private rooms would have been taken quickly. Only the large common room might have had space available, but it was not the place for a young mother to bear a child.

A stable behind the inn might not have been the best place - but it would have been dry and warmed by the bodies and breath of the cattle or sheep.

So even if he didn’t give them his own room, the innkeeper obviously didn’t leave them destitute either.

And there, so the story goes, in humble surroundings rather than a palace, the new king was born. The unwitting innkeeper played a significant role, after all.

May we always keep our eyes open and our hearts ready to offer hospitality.

You never know whom you might welcome.

Empathetic Preparer

No, there is no mention of such a person in the scriptures. But I imagine her. Maybe a little on the plump side, with an easy smile, a sense of seeing quickly what needs to be done, and a bustling manner that makes sure it happens.

I can see her on normal days overseeing the details of running an inn—making sure the beds were made and the rooms clean between patrons. Taking care that the food prepared in the kitchen is up to her standards. Not intimidated by rowdy guests, but able with a stern look or a ready witticism to defuse situations that might arise before they escalated into serious difficulty.

During the census time, she might appear to be a little less accommodating and a trifle more frustrated than usual, but still attuned to the needs of the overcrowded guests in the inn.

When her husband tells her he's given the stable out back to a young couple to whom a birth seemed imminent, I see another side of her character immediately rising to the surface as she exclaims that "you can't expect a baby to arrive surrounded by filth."

So she makes sure that the straw is fresh and she bustles around the young mother, intent on making the humble surroundings as warm and homelike as possible. She might even have been there at the birth, as she may have been at many before, calming the fears, helping the miracle to take place once again and assuring both mother and father that children might seldom be convenient, but are always a special gift of God.

She might well have supplied the clean cloths in which to wrap the baby Jesus before she lay Him in Mary's waiting arms.

Caring is the minimum we can do and empathy for others in a busy time is a special fit which we can give.

Don't ever think that basic hospitality is unimportant in God's Kingdom.

Faithful Messenger

We picture them in many different ways.

Rolly-polly cherubs with rouged cheeks and golden harps.

Guardians looking over our shoulders and perhaps nudging us when we stand at the brink of a decision between what we know we should do and an alternative that may take us in another direction.

In *Paradise Lost* they are the army of God, fierce in their brightness and brandishing swords of eternal flame.

From the scriptures, tall, imposing figures whose white marble images adorn massive cathedrals with their imposing grace.

I personally like the angel depicted in the tv show, *Saving Grace*, who seems often enigmatically befuddled in his ruffled attempt to guide his charges toward a better way of living and who seems unsure of God's purposes.

In the scripture, angels serve many functions, but the most prominent is as messengers, delivering a word from God to a surprised humanity.

The message is seldom expected and not universally welcomed, which is certainly realistic since the Word of God often breaks in when we least expect it and generally pushes us in ways that move us outside our arena of comfort, calling us to engage in life with a perspective which runs contrary to the norm.

Most who receive the word initially resist and take some persuasion. It must be a mostly thankless task to be the faithful messenger. I wonder if angels get the choice? Yet, deliver their message they do. Mostly quietly, one-on-one to people who are then given the choice to hear and respond, or ignore and walk away.

The next time you feel that nudge to step outside your comfort zone and reach into life with the love that comes from God, look around —

You might just catch the whir of wings from one who has whispered in your ear.

Awe-Struck Watcher

Shepherd and their sheep, in countries of the near East, have an amazing relationship.

In western countries we are used to seeing shepherd with their faithful sheepdogs, driving their sheep. The dogs doing the bulk of the labor, taking the directions from the shepherd by way of whistles or calls.

But Palestinian shepherds do not have dogs, nor do they drive their flocks from place to place.

Instead, they lead them, using calls or whistles, or sometimes an instrument like a pipe or a harp.

The shepherds tend to know their flocks with an uncommon intimacy and the sheep respond with amazing understanding to their shepherd's voice or signals.

When the Psalmist says "*he leads me beside still waters*" he is accurately reflecting the trustful and intimate relationship between sheep and shepherd.

Shepherds assume a deep responsibility for their charges and have been known to defend them even at risk to their own lives.

I don't think it was an accident that the angel messenger came to those shepherds out in the field. It was to those diligent watchers that the message came of the birth of one who would grow to be the shepherd of all shepherds. The one whose love for the sheep of God's pasture would take him all the way to the cross.

Shepherds weren't considered among the elite of society. As a matter of fact, their job, though necessary, was lowly and considered unremarkable. But the message came to them and these humble servants were among the first to be told that the Savior was born.

May we, like them, be struck with awe as we hear again the good news that is to be for all people.

Jesus is born!

Unlikely Heroine

The story of Rahab is one of intrigue worthy of the writings of John Le Carre.

Rahab was a practitioner of the oldest profession and is certainly a strange name to be found in the genealogy of Jesus.

When Joshua sent spies across the Jordan into enemy territory they devised a plan to hide in plain sight, as it were, in a place where strangers needed not be an anomaly.

When I took a tour of Pompeii, it was clear that the most egalitarian establishments in the city were the houses of prostitution. There are signs posted in most of the known languages of the ancient world because men of every nation would avail themselves of the service provided there. Strangers there would be the rule rather than the exception.

Unfortunately for the spies, someone ratted them out and the King of Jericho sent word to Rahab that she'd better turn them over, or else.

But at risk to her own life, she hid them, blatantly lying to the authorities and when it was safe, lowered them outside the city walls after gaining a promise that when the battle came, special consideration would be given to her and her family.

As a sign, she tied a scarlet cord in her window to identify her dwelling.

The battle did come and Israelites moved into the land, fulfilling God's promise.

Rahab was spared and gave up her profession to marry one of the Israelites. She bore him a son. The son's name was Boaz. Boaz was the man who took a foreigner to be his own wife. Her name was Ruth and their grandson was David, of Bethlehem.

And much further down the line there was a child born in a stable in David's own city. His name was Jesus.

Rahab is an unlikely heroine. Yet she, too, played a role in the history of God's salvation, first for a nomadic people seeking a homeland, and then to all of the rest of us through a man who showed us God as never before.

For To Us...

“There is light at the end of the tunnel” is a phrase that describes the sense of being able to see an end to a time of suffering or despair. An end to the misery. An end to the hopelessness. If you can catch a glimpse of the light and tell that you are about to emerge from the darkness, you can endure the present trouble.

That was the word of hope from Isaiah to a people who have been bereft of hope for so many years. Exiles in a strange land. Captives of a conquering nation. Their homes lost. Their families often torn apart.

My friend Tien Nguyen was separated from his wife and children for more than two years when they escaped from Vietnam before the Viet-Kong takeover. His story is harrowing and anytime he retold it, tears would fill his eyes. He was reunited with his wife and children almost by accident. All the time they were separated, his wife and children assumed he was dead, and he assumed they were, as well.

But they got a glimmer of hope on a bulletin board in one of the refugee camps and eventually found each other and came to America, where his children and my children became best friends.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light...”

Hope. Born of the invincibility of the human spirit and nurtured by a trust that God is a God of promise and that no matter how dark it may seem, there is a light that will not go out.

The people of Israel looked for a great leader, a king who would defeat their Babylonia captors and release them from captivity.

He would bring peace. He would restore hope. He would be called ‘Wonderful’. He would be ‘Mighty.’

The baby born in Bethlehem certainly wouldn’t seem to be that hoped-for one.

But in the grace of God, he turned out to be more than anyone ever imagined.

Now its up to us to live up to his legacy.

Frightened 'Yes-Men'

One thing you knew if you were a member of Herod's court was that you didn't mess around with Herod.

We've already seen who he was. Now here, we see him as a symbol, in the Gospel of Matthew, of the kingdom of this world which would always be in conflict with the kingdom which Christ wants to bring to the world. The two kingdoms couldn't be more different.

Herod represents a kingdom based on the love of power. The power to declare life or death on the whim of whoever is in power at the moment. Power to bless or to destroy, dependent on the will of the one who can arrest and hold power. Power that depends on fear to maintain itself and backed by the force that can demand such fear.

It is this love of power which defines, for Matthew at least, the exact opposite kind of power that God wields in the world.

The scribes and chief priests, in Matthews eyes, have sold out to such power and will again and again throughout his gospel, prove themselves slaves to its will.

Jesus, on the other hand, represents power based in love. Power which does not seek to control but which gives of itself fully and completely in order to draw humankind to itself.

Herod was troubled because he saw everyone and everything as a possible threat. In a world based on the love of power, this will always be so. And in such a world, the threat is well grounded because the slightest of things can upset or usurp the power.

Herod couldn't help but be troubled and when Herod was troubled, all those around him trembled because you can never be sure of what power will choose to do. You can be relatively certain, however, that it will not be pleasant.

God doesn't want 'yes-men.' God wants those who say 'yes' to life and live, not for powers sake, but for loves sake.

It was true then.

It is true now.

Truth Seekers

What does it mean to say that someone is wise?

It has to be more than intelligence. We've all known or know of intelligent people who didn't seem to be very smart in the way they either used or displayed their intelligence.

Maybe being wise has to do with discernment. The serenity prayer, used by Alcoholics Anonymous, and others says:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

In the case of the story from Matthew, those 'wise men' seemed to be those who were willing to search for truth and continue the search no matter how long the journey or how high the cost. They knew that something momentous was happening and felt drawn to discover the source, no matter where that journey might take them.

I don't think that the journey toward wisdom ever ends. The books of *Proverbs* in the Hebrew scripture and the *Wisdom fo Solomon* in the Apocryphal books, advise us that wisdom is a prize that is worth the journey. In the book of Proverbs the author, speaking as the voice of wisdom, says:

"Whoever finds me finds life." Proverbs 8:35

Those seekers followed a star because they felt that at the end of their journey was the ultimate truth. They went to the palace first, because they felt that surely the ultimate truth would reside in the halls of power.

But it wasn't there.

They had to look further, deeper. So, they searched until they found the unexpected. A child born to humility and relative poverty, whose words and touch would eventually alter the way human beings saw each other and related to God.

And having found it, they chose not to share their wisdom with those who craved power, but instead *"went home by another way."*

What is the truth you see when you peer into the manger?

Voiceless Innocents

There is another part to this story which over we generally gingerly step. We don't like to be reminded that there was suffering when we are in the midst of celebrating, but the story is there, and we can't, in good conscience, ignore it.

Power will be served no matter who gets hurt. Whether by unmanned drones or suicide bomber, or at the point of a Roman sword or a Hutu machete, power will seek to win by force what can't be won by intimidation.

Herod couldn't take the chance of doing nothing. Those who live by power always realize that their control is tenuous at best. Threats came from every side and power knows that fear will at least give them the momentary illusion of control. If he didn't know how to find the '*newborn king*' to eliminate him quietly, then he would use the blunt force of his power to eliminate the possibility.

The cries of the children who were murdered and the cries of their mothers who watched their children die, echo across time, reminding us that it is always the innocent who suffer first and whose voices are seldom heard.

What terror we do to one another, we, who call ourselves the pinnacle of God's creation. What horror we commit in the name of God, or nation, or power.

The voiceless innocent cry out with their blood and often we choose to shut our eyes or change the channel, or pretend that everything is just fine.

The presence of this story in the middle of the Christmas saga reminds us that we cannot ignore those who have no voice. In fact, says the story, it is for their very sake that Christ has come into the world. Christ has come to show us a better way and to call us to our better selves.

Don't shut out the voices of the innocent who suffer in terror from war and disease or hunger or poverty or abuse.

We have the means. We have received the call.

What we must find now is the will to truly love God, and we do that when we have learned to truly love one another.

No one said being a Christian would be easy, by the way.

Indifferent Observers

Angeline and Brad adopt a baby and suddenly that child is lifted out of obscurity and becomes the darling of the media, his face on the cover of magazines through which people are made aware of his every change.

Meanwhile the ones who did not get adopted, though their plight is illuminated briefly by the good fortune of the one graced by adoption, eventually drift back into the obscurity that is their normal state.

Most of them will die at a relatively young age, victims of a poverty we can scarcely imagine; subject to easy infection and the lack of basic health care that can cure so cheaply, if they could but afford it, or if it were even available to them.

And, for the most part, we simply do not care.

That may be harsh. It's not that we don't care. It's that we are simply indifferent. After all, the need is so great and we have problems of our own.

When Jesus was born and when he walked the earth, we might live under the illusion that everywhere he went he was mobbed like Michael Jackson. We would be wrong.

Ringo really told the truth when he uttered, and was quickly condemned for his offhand comment, that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus.

For, in his time, Jesus lived in a very small part of a very small nation obscure in its presence and vastly limited in its influence. And most people just didn't know about him, and even those who might have seen or heard him, just didn't care.

We all practice selective indifference and our lives are so full of ourselves that when something very special happens, we tend to notice it less and less.

Jesus grew to be one who tried to show us another way.

Jesus was never indifferent to the needs or presence of others. He was hyper-sensitive to them and lived his life giving and calling others to learn to give of themselves. For love is not love until and unless it is given away.

No one much noticed his birth. Very few his life or death.

The few who did woke the rest of us.

Now it is up to us to live the 'Way' of Jesus, which is never the way of indifference.

Unwilling Accomplices

For every action or decision there is a result or a consequence. What I eat, what I drink, what I wear, what I use as a consumer - all these things come from someplace, created by someone, and my decisions ultimately have an effect on their lives. When I drive my car, I add to the carbon emissions in the atmosphere. But, at the same time, I also have a positive effect on the economy in Oklahoma, which depends a great deal on petroleum products for its economic health.

Nothing I do is without effect, both good and bad.

Those who collected taxes in Jesus' day were not the most popular of people. Many were even despised.

They were looked upon by the priests and scribes as traitors at worst and sinners at least, as they plied their trade and exacted the taxes due to the empire.

When it was determined that a tax needed to be levied, it became necessary for Joseph to travel to his ancestral home in order to be counted so that the tax could be collected.

Because Mary was his betrothed, she had to be there as well.

By the time they left for Bethlehem, she was almost ready to deliver the child.

The empire didn't care.

The tax gatherers were only concerned that the census be taken. They couldn't be bothered with the situation of a pregnant woman needing a place of comfort and warmth to deliver a child.

They became unwilling facilitators causing Jesus to be born in a stable because it was too crowded in the tiny town for them to find other more suitable accommodations. It could have gone very badly. Fortunately the birth was accomplished and the child was healthy.

Years later Jesus would call a tax man as one of his disciples.

From unwilling accomplice to trusted friend and faithful follower.

Maybe there is hope for one such as me after all.

Faithful Outcast

Every year at the Feast of Weeks, a celebration used to mark the end of the grain harvest, one of the main stories read in the synagogue is the story of Ruth.

For a people who identify themselves as God's chosen to include and honor one who was not only *not* Jewish, but part of the hated clan from Moab, her story must be extraordinary. And indeed it is.

Naomi was a Jewish woman who migrated because of a famine in Judah to a foreign land. Driven by hunger and poverty, she and Elimelech migrated to Moab. Her sons grew and married Moabite women. But in the course of three years Elimelech and both sons died, leaving the three women without providers.

Naomi decided it would be best for all concerned if she returned to Judah where she might be able to find a relative to take pity on her. But she could not wish such uncertainty on her two daughters-in-law. She advised them to return to their fathers, where they could be certain of acceptance. Orpah finally agreed. But Ruth would not leave Naomi and returned with her to the complete uncertainty of being accepted in the Jewish territory.

Eventually her faithfulness found reward when a relative of Naomi's fell in love with Ruth and took both she and Naomi into his home and care.

Ruth bore Boaz a son. The women who celebrated with Naomi over the birth of her grandson called him a "*restorer of life*" to Naomi.

One thousand years later, a descendant of that child would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and the Giver of Life for all of humankind.

From an outcast who loved another more than she loved herself was born one who reminds us all that we are to love one another as we love ourselves.

The purposes of God are born in the most unlikely of places and we are offered the chance to see them as we peer into the manger.

Isaiah 53:1-12
Leviticus 16:21

Sunday, December 20

Suffering Servant

There was a ritual performed by the ancient Hebrews once a year. At that time – on a day set aside for atonement – two goats were selected.

One was offered up as a sin offering burned on the alter and its blood symbolically sprinkled over the people to symbolize a cleansing. Like the blood sprinkled for Passover.

The second goat was brought before the high priest who would lay hands upon the head of the goat symbolically transferring the sins of all the people to the head of the goat who was then released into the wilderness, carrying with it the sins of the people. We call this unfortunate creature the “scapegoat.”

Isaiah 53 seems to hark back to that ancient understanding:

“All we like sheep, have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

When the church began looking back into the Hebrew prophets to find words to describe our experience of Jesus Christ in the world, this was one of the most prominently quoted passages.

This ‘suffering servant’ in the ancient text may have pointed to some particular individual, but more likely stood for the example of one who would live life for the sake of others without regard for their own safety or well-being.

When the church remembered Jesus’ suffering and death, and his subsequent resurrection, Isaiah 53 described the events perfectly.

The difference between Jesus and the scapegoat is that the goat didn’t choose its lot. It had no say in what was done to it. It was an unwilling participant in that particular ritual.

Jesus, on the other hand, chose to go to Jerusalem and after much struggle in prayer, chose to face the cross. He *“poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressions.”*

And we, my friends, are his spiritual offspring.

2 Samuel 11:2-12:15
Matthew 1:6b

Monday, December 21

Victim of Choice

Power tends to corrupt.

David was a good king. He was a faithful king. David did so much that was good and worthy of admiration.

But kings can fall prey to their own publicity and grow to believe that they can do no wrong.

When David saw Bathsheba he wanted her. So he took her.

Did she have a choice? How does one say 'no' to a king? She submitted, whether willingly or unwillingly, and her choice and his choice set in motion a chain of events that would eventually tear down much of what David had built.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that "*in everything God works for good...*"

David and Bathsheba, because of that initial choice became trapped in a quagmire that led from desire to deceit to betrayal and finally to murder by proxy.

They might have gotten away with it except that Nathan, David's faithful and courageous advisor, stood up to the king and named him for what he was and demanded from David repentance.

The choices we make may not always be good choices, but they may be redeemable choices in the long run.

David did repent. Though the damage had already been done, out of the union between David and "*the wife of Uriah*" came Solomon, who was blessed with wisdom and who led Israel to a place of honor among the nations.

And from that line eventually was born a child, not in the palaces of royalty and power, but in the back streets of poverty.

He would grow to become the one at whose name,

"Every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord---"

Homecoming

It's hard to go home again. Too many people 'remember when' and don't let you grow beyond that far distant time.

I remember returning to Penn Avenue Christian Church after I had been in ministry for several years. As a 'timothy' from that church, I was invited to share in worship leadership.

At the end of the service one of the ladies who had been in the church for about fifty years, came out, squeezed my hand, and said "*Ricky, that was such a cute prayer.*"

Cute wasn't exactly what I was going for, but I just smiled and gave her a hug. At least they hadn't led me to the edge of a cliff with the intention of sacrificing me.

Jesus himself declared, after reading from Isaiah 61 in his home synagogue;

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled—"

He had grown up with the scriptures as his watchword. He had listened to the teachers and obviously thought deeply about the meaning and power of God's word. It was this passage from Isaiah that he identified as defining his life and the ministry that he would bring to the world.

The passage itself comes from the word of Isaiah to the returning exiles who had languished in Babylon for so many years without hope.

Now that they were coming home, Isaiah was concerned about whether they would finally live up to the call of God to be blessed peculiarly and to be a blessing on behalf of all humankind.

"You," he says to the people, *"shall be called the priests of the land."*

"You," he says *"are to be oaks of righteousness."*

If we, who are reading this today, are to call ourselves by the name of Jesus, the Christ, then it is now we who must hear this word as a defining call for who we can be and indeed are called to be for the sake of the world and of the kingdom.

What will we do, we who peer into the manger, in this holy season.

What will we do with our lives so that today this scripture will be fulfilled?

Exuberant Proclaimers

One of my favorite Christmas stories is of Raphael, the Herald Angel.

Raphael is the choirmaster of the heavenly chorus and since Jesus' crucifixion has sequestered himself in the Silent Grave, despondent over the fact that humankind had not responded to the glorious proclamation of Christmas morning, but had chosen to sacrifice the one who was meant to be Savior.

After 2000 years a fellow angel, Lemuel, seeks him out and he has to come out of seclusion to travel with him to earth.

At first Raphael refuses, saying that humans do not listen. They are hopeless.

But finally persuaded, Raphael returns with Lemuel where he sees, for the first time, churches. He is told that they have been built in honor of God's gift of Jesus.

He is then taken to see the great cities and everywhere buildings are festooned with lights and people are bustling about, arms filled with gifts and everywhere the cheery greeting "Merry Christmas!"

At each revelation Raphael is more amazed.

Finally he is taken into a tiny church where he watches in quiet awe as children perform a play in which they tell the story of the birth of Jesus.

Finally one child begins to recite:

"And it came to pass in those days...

...and there were shepherds...

...and the angel said to them..."

Raphael whispers with tears in his eyes – "My very words..."

And then the children all began to sing,

"Hark! The herald angels sing..."

Then suddenly, blending with these voices, arise others, all singing in different languages, but all with the same message. The Hallelujah Choir and the Angelous Chorus and Jubilee Singers and all the other heavenly choirs join this earthbound chorus lifting their song to fill the heavens.

And Raphael, the Herald Angel, led the joyful music.

It is a time of celebration.

Voices of hope are needed in the face of terror and darkness. Voices of shalom are needed in the face of endless war and hatred. Voices of reason are needed in the face of fear and distrust.

Voices to proclaim the good news –

For to us a child is born...

Now will you join to sing as you peer into the manger?

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.