

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
1/4/2009, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed *to their own country* by another way.(Matthew 2:12, RSV)

One of the great pastors in our town, in my opinion, is the Rev. Timothy Keller, who is the Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Recently, Rev. Keller wrote and published a fine little book called *The Prodigal God*¹, which is a beautiful, sustained meditation on the parable of the Prodigal Son. I hope that God will permit me to grow in grace and wisdom through Rev. Keller's book.

Toward the end of his book, Rev. Keller offers a moving discussion of the idea of "home."² That's where the Magi in this morning's Gospel Lesson are heading: they are heading home. They have followed their star all the way to Bethlehem, they have knelt before the Christ Child and offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and now they depart "to their *own* country." My theme on this Epiphany Sunday is that now, wherever those Wise Men wander on God's good earth, they will never be deprived of "home," for they have seen the Christ Child and worshiped him³. This world can no longer be such a strange country for them, for they have met the Owner of this world in the wee form of a Babe, and He bids them welcome, wherever they roam in his world.

By tradition, the Wise Men are named Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Let's take one of them, say, Melchior. What I am thinking is that Mrs. Melchior will sense the change in her husband, now that he has seen the Christ Child. So, she sees her man on the horizon, coming home from his long journey to Bethlehem. He draws nearer, and she sees that he is haggard, as he often is at the end of his journeys. When she hugs him, the hug confirms her estimation, for he feels thin in her arms and bony in the shoulders and chest. But also, there is a new kind of peace about her husband.

For you see, I imagine Melchior to be a man of integrity. He takes seriously his duties as husband and father. Furthermore, he is an intellectual man and a scholar trained in the ways of Eastern sky watching. It is *his* way of trying to taking care of his family. He studies the stars in hopes that he can find *something* that will make this world safer and more manageable for such a man as he is: a man with others depending on him. Most likely, this trip to Bethlehem was not his first pilgrimage in search of truth. But however that might be, whether this is his first adventure away from home or one of many, *this time* he has had success. For he has seen the Christ Child, and in seeing Him, he has seen the very Way, and Truth and Light of this world.

And so, he comes home comforted. His wife senses it in him. He believes now that life is going to work out okay. He understands now that he is not alone in trying to take

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (Dutton: New York, 2008).

² Pages 90-102.

³ "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him..."(Matthew 2:11, KJV)

care of his family. All the old threats persist. There are still wars and battles, disease and accident. Everything is the same as before *except* for this big change: He has met and worshiped the Christ Child, and now this world feels better to him.

In his book, Rev. Keller quotes the fine line of Robert Frost about home:

Home is where, when you have to go there,
they have to take you in. (“The Death of the Hired Man”)

But in the end, do any of us have a real home in this world — a sure harbor and a refuge against the storms of the day? A case could be made that our poor human race is fundamentally homeless and ill-at-ease on this planet. The times are out of joint⁴ for us and there is a restlessness in our souls. To this day, we bear the marks of our ancient ancestors, Adam and Eve, who were expelled from their natural home, the Garden of Eden, and prevented from re-entering. The Bible speaks of a mighty angel guarding the way:

[The LORD] drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24, RSV)

We’ve been wanderers on this earth ever since. It is one of the chief Biblical teachings about us. So, not only are Adam and Eve expelled from the Garden, but soon afterwards their son, Cain, murders his brother, Abel, and then is destined to wander this earth with no fixed abode and no place of peace. Even good people, like father Abraham, starts his story as a wander. He “went out, not knowing whither he went”:

⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. (Hebrews 11:8, KJV)

Jacob has to flee his brother Esau and live down in a foreign land, Haran. Joseph is stripped away from home, sold into slavery, and sojourns in Egypt. Mighty Assyria destroys Israel, and mighty Babylon sends Judah into captivity. Eventually the Jews return to Jerusalem, but nothing is right. Their land becomes dominated by empire after empire, beginning with the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. Images of exile and restlessness seem natural to our human race.

You might have heard me complain about this before: The night I was installed as pastor of this church, back in 1991, our dear, old Toyota Corolla was stolen. I grieved about that for years and carried my keys with me, in hope that I would chance upon that car, hop into it, and speed away with it back home.

⁴ Let us go in together,
And still your fingers on your lips, I pray.
The time is out of joint—O cursèd spite,
That ever I was born to set it right!
Nay, come, let’s go together.
Hamlet Act 1, scene 5, 186–190

Dear Bishop Lazareth, now of blessed memory, heard about the theft of our car and sent us a note back then, along with a check for five hundred dollars from his Bishop's Discretionary Fund. The note was simply a verse of scripture:

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.(Hebrew 13:14, KJV)

It was a reminder that in this troubled world, we suffer setbacks and heartaches, and that this world is not yet a perfect home for us, but that through the grace of God, we may seek one to come.

And that is what Epiphany is about. On that first Epiphany, when the foreign Gentile gentlemen from the East visited Baby Jesus, they were able afterwards to head back home, and I mean "home" in a richer sense than ever before. For apart from Jesus, in the depths of our soul, we all know that our homes are fragile, and that for all we know, we might end up like the foolish man who built his house on sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.(Matthew 7:27, KJV)

But the Wise Men of Epiphany now know that though rains might descend and floods come and wind blow, there is a sense in which their house shall *not* fall. For nothing too bad can happen to them anymore. With their own eyes, they have seen the Saviour. And as St. Paul testifies concerning him:

For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.(2 Cor. 8:9, KJV)

And so it is that though birds of the air have their nests and foxes have their holes, Jesus was content to have nowhere to lay his head. He was willing to be homeless that through his piety and virtue he might win for us a home — a home on this earth now, since he is willing to come and dwell with us anywhere — and eternal mansions in the world to come.

We have now begun the adventure of a new year, the year of our Lord 2009. We do not know exactly what this new year will bring, but we know that we shall not face this year alone. If we had not Jesus, there could come times of loneliness or regret which would rock our souls and leave us feeling that we have no firm place in this world, but I am happy to promise you as you go forth into this new year, that you do indeed have Jesus. Like a turtle bringing along his shell with him everywhere he goes, so you will never be homeless in this world. Take a rocket ship and sail to the moon or to some distant planet. It does not matter, for there too you shall find a home, for the Christ Child of Bethlehem is King and Saviour of the universe. You are his and he is yours.

No matter how far you roam, the saying goes, there is no place like home. And yet for you — Christ's woman, Christ's man — you may roam wherever you will and still be at home: for you will find Christ there, and he is glad to be your fortress and your refuge and your home. Dwell, then in him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

