

“Safe Return Doubtful” (*Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem*)

*An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said,
“Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt,
and remain there until I tell you . . .”
Then Joseph got up, took the child and
his mother by night, and went to Egypt.
(Matthew 2:13b, 14)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the First Sunday after Christmas, **December 31, 2017**
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“O, Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Those beloved words we just sang on this First Sunday after Christmas Day were written by an American Episcopal priest, Rev. Phillips Brooks, long time rector of Boston’s Trinity Church. Overwhelmed by his visit to the Holy Land in 1865, he began to write the lyrics as he overlooked Bethlehem while standing atop a hill south of Jerusalem known as Ramat Rachel (the Heights of Rachel).

Today Ramat Rachel is a beautiful kibbutz with hotel, conference center, and restaurant. I’ve seen many Jewish weddings at that place overlooking the Shepherds Fields between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, and conducted renewal of vow ceremonies under the huppah overlooking the city. It’s one of my favorite places to lead our Holy Land groups. After we lunch I gather our pilgrims on the edge of the hill and share Bethlehem’s four stories from the Hebrew bible.

- (1) Bethlehem’s first mention is Genesis 35, the spot where Jacob buried his wife Rachel when she died in childbirth with Benjamin. The kibbutz is called Ramat Rachel due to its proximity to the site revered by Jews as Rachel’s tomb.
- (2) The romantic epic of Ruth and Boaz, how Ruth the Moabitess comes, impoverished, with her mother-in-law Naomi to Bethlehem. The hills of Moab, some 25 -30 miles distant across the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, are sometimes visible. A landowner named Boaz fell in love with her, and the Book of Ruth tells the story of how they became the great grandparents of David.
- (3) 1000 years prior to Jesus’ birth, the book of Samuel tells the story of the prophet coming to Bethlehem to anoint the chosen one to be king, finding the shepherd boy, David.
- (4) Then, 700 years before Jesus is born, the prophet Micah writes, *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*

Those four Bethlehem narratives from the Hebrew bible serve as luminaries, candles lighting our journey around the Advent wreath to bring us to the gospel story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem which we celebrate at Christmas. Fresh still is Bethlehem’s story on this First Sunday after Christmas, its songs yet upon our lips. For now, these Twelve Days of Christmas, Bethlehem remains with us . . . but not for long. *Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem.*

This morning our liturgy has focused on Matthew's telling of the magi coming from the east to worship the newborn king, setting the stage for *Bedlam in Bethlehem*, Herod's slaughter of the innocent children. With Herod -- whose Herodian palace and eventual tomb was very nearby Bethlehem, the sweet story of a quiet village unravels. "*Bedlam*," by the way, is a word actually derived from *Bethlehem*. In the 14th and 15th century London there was an asylum named the *Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem*. The colloquial pronunciation of *Bethlehem* was constricted *Bedlam*, a word which came to describe a scene of confusion. And so it was two millennia ago in Bethlehem of Judea -- there was *Bedlam in Bethlehem*!

Being warned in a dream, Joseph escapes Herod's rage as he takes Mary and Jesus across the Negev and into the Sinai region, deeper into this Egypt. Imagine the sands curling, wisping beneath their feet in a thousand dry whispers. Leaving Bethlehem, Joseph knew that *Safe Return was Doubtful*.

When in Cairo today we marvel at the pyramids of nearby Giza which, even in the time of Jesus, were already some 2500 years old! Imagine Jesus near the pyramids. What a different world than Bethlehem!



Christian pilgrims to Egypt today visit, not just these pyramids whose antiquity reaches back much further than the beginnings of Christianity and Judaism, but also two churches in the Coptic Christian area built over the spot where, traditionally, Joseph and Mary first rested after their journey to the Nile. While Matthew is silent on their time in Egypt, traditions suggest they stayed some three years before Herod died, making Jesus perhaps 5 or 6 years old when they return to Israel -- not to Bethlehem in Judea (which is too uncomfortably close to the power center that is Jerusalem), but to Nazareth in the Galilee.

With the holy family's departure from Bethlehem, Matthew is finished with Bethlehem, the city vanishing from the biblical narrative. Though as an adult Jesus travels all around it, he never said to have visited the city of his nativity. Queen Helena, Constantine's mother, would establish in Bethlehem the Church of the Nativity in 327 A. D. over the cave where local tradition had for hundreds of years remembered and revered the birth of Jesus. This church, of course, became and remains a place of pilgrimage. Many millions go to Bethlehem to honor the birth of Jesus, but as for the biblical story, *Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem*.

Bethlehem was primed for the year 2000, building a new bus facility to accommodate the expected flood of pilgrims. But in late 2000 Yasser Arafat triggered the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising). A few months later, just after New Year's Day 2001, the Intifada growing

worse, I traveled to the Holy Land with a group of church leaders and university scholars, meeting with the mayor of Bethlehem, whose primary message was to convince us that Bethlehem was safe for our people to visit.

We did, in fact, find Bethlehem safe. And, empty. I'll never forget the thirty of us making our way through a mostly vacated Manger Square into that cavernous church and down into the grotto. I've been in that cave many times – before and since -- when you could barely move and waited long in line. There was no wait in 2001. Ours was one of only two busses I saw in the facility, and the grotto was eerily empty.

Sad that peace in this birthplace of the Prince of Peace could be so elusive. Some tour leaders, during those years, simply skipped Bethlehem. After all, the only place most groups visit with New Testament biblical significance is the Church of the Nativity. Shipping for olive wood souvenirs and enjoying lunch, the journey is complete for many groups. All told, our excursion to Bethlehem takes only a few hours, so that we quickly say goodbye to our wonderful Palestinian guide and head back to Jerusalem only six miles away, where there is so much more to see that is connected to the biblical story of Jesus.

While we could spend an entire week in the Galilee and two or three weeks in Jerusalem, four or five hours in Bethlehem seems plenty. *Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem*. Not the Magi, who returned by another route, wishing not to risk another encounter with Herod. Not Matthew who, having told the story, never whispers of Bethlehem again. Not even Jesus, quickly whisked away to Egypt and never reported to have returned. He returns to his hometown of Nazareth to preach, but we never do we hear of a return trip to Bethlehem.

No wonder, then, our trips to Holy Land do the same, as does our worship during Christmas and Epiphany. Each year our liturgy take us in and out of Bethlehem with haste, celebrating the birth of Jesus, then quickly escaping to the peaceful Galilee to focus on Jesus' ministry.

Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem. Yet, make no mistake. Bethlehem, this Bethlehem of Bedlam and human brokenness, is what Christmas is all about. A God unwilling to come to THIS Bethlehem won't do us much good. God didn't come to us, Emmanuel, to adorn a Christmas card with infant innocence, but to bring bloody redemption through being companion to our Brokenness.

When Jesus left Bethlehem for Egypt, *Safe Return was Doubtful*. That phrase originates with an expedition to Antarctica 103 years ago, in 1914, under the command of Sir Ernest Shackleton. Hiring a crew for his aptly named ship, *Endurance*, Shackleton is famously said to have placed a warning at the bottom of his applications -- "*Safe Return Doubtful*." Talk about full disclosure!

What if, in seeking new church members to join us on our journey of faith, we added the words, *Safe Return Doubtful*? In one sense, I suppose we do, explicit in our intent as a church to change lives, to reshape futures for Jesus Christ. To become a Christian, "*old things pass away and all becomes new*," to quote Paul. The church aims to leave its mark on you, to change you.

Shackleton was saying, "*If you board this ship, you're 'All In.'* We have a mission and hope to accomplish it, but whether we are successful or not, once you are on this ship you, with each one

of us, are All In.” Church architecture provides commentary on this. You are sitting in the *Nave* (deriving from then Latin for “*ship*,” which we see in our word, *Navy*). Sitting here, in the nave, you can see the hull of the ship all around you and hear the call to be “*All In.*”

Forty-two years ago Sherry stood at the threshold of Eastside Baptist Church in Pine Bluff and slipped her arm into her father’s to hear him whisper with a smile, “*It’s not too late to change your mind.*” I suppose he was saying to her, “*Safe Return is Doubtful.*” Once I escort you to that altar the voyage will have begun, you will be “*All In*” and *Safe Return is Doubtful.*

Well, the adventurous did apply, and *Endurance* launched into the deep. The ship became mired in the pack ice, unassailably trapped never again to find safe harbor. Thankfully, the crew was dramatically rescued and did return safely, but only after an ordeal lasting nearly two years. It was 102 years ago next week, still stuck on that ship on January 10, 1915, that crewman Thomas Orde-Lees looked 100 years into the future and wrote in his journal, “*No doubt the explorers of 2015, if there is anything left to explore, will . . . carry their pocket wireless telephones . . . of course, there will be an aerial daily excursion to both poles by then.*” Talk about prophetic!

Sir Shackleton wrote about the human spirit of exploration and adventure, “*We all have our own White South,*” reflecting upon the human spirit of exploration. Christ of the Hills UMC has a *White South* which beckons us, calling us to be “*All In*” as we engage the quest, even if *Safe Return is Doubtful.*

Tomorrow we step into the emptiness of a New Year, a pivot point every year in our calendar inviting us to reflect upon the journey past, and the journey ahead. Christ of the Hills will not be the same church one year from today, as we enter 2019, as we are today entering 2018. The pictorial directory will need to be updated. I don’t mean merely that our faces will have aged by a year (which they will). Nor simply that we will say goodbye to some members who will join the Church Triumphant, even as we say hello to new members who will engage with us the mission. All that is true, of course, but I mean that our decisions as a church make *Safe Return Doubtful.* We will be different as we keep moving forward.

And that’s a good thing. We don’t want Safe, if by Safe we mean a preservation of the status quo. There’s a reason we call our journey together, a FAITH journey. This is not something to fear! Change is fundamental to living, and if we wish to be a Church Alive, we must be changing.

Nobody Lingers in Bethlehem. If Bethlehem is the moment giving birth to new possibility, that possibility now must be engaged, not merely admired and celebrated. Bethlehem we visit today, but from there we move forward to engage the mission of the Christ who there was born.