

"ON GOING ANOTHER WAY..

Text: "Being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod they departed to their own country by another way." -- Matthew 2:12

There is a funny little afterthought near the end of the Christmas story, as it is told by Matthew. It was all over and the Wise Men were about to head home. It had been a long, puzzling, tiring time since the day, weeks before, when they had first seen that star in the sky beckoning them off. They climbed up on their camels. The star which they had seen in the east moved on before them, led them over hill and dale and desert sands to Jerusalem to King Herod himself. How exciting! How grand his palace was; surely that was where the new King would be born. But, after a troubling visit with him, they followed the star down to Bethlehem, five miles south, to a lowly stable outside the Inn where it finally came to rest. Mary and Joseph were there, and the Babe. The Wise Men offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, glorying the Christ Child in His manger. What a sight! The first Christmas: festive, angelic, magical, Magi, shepherds, songs of joy, gifts. . . .

But, by now it was time to head home. Their holiday visit was over. They were tired, exhausted with all there is to do, and all that can go wrong with holiday visits. It was time to get back to normalcy. But, they had a problem . . . which way to go? That was the question. Herod had commanded them to come back to the palace at Jerusalem and he was the King: "Come back this way and report to me! I want to know about this baby King."

". . . But, being warned by God in a dream" the Gospel says, "that they should not return to Herod,

they departed to their own country by another way." They listened to the Lord of their dreams.

That sounds dramatic, but, which way to go back from the holiday to the regular world is always the question. As they leave and disappear up through the valley, we can see ourselves, turning the corner from last year into the next; leaving behind the festivities and parties and presents of the holiday season; winding our way out through falling Christmas trees and holly boughs and gifts enough to crowd our dresser drawers; waving good-bye to loved ones we see too seldom; embarking on a journey back into all that continues and what keeps the work-a-day world going day by day.

Herod says come back where you were. Pick up the comfortable journey again as it was when the star first appeared; just as if nothing had happened in Bethlehem. God says, "Go a step higher. Take a different road into tomorrow. Be more spiritual. Go another way!"

The world says, "Come back to the same way you learned to manage life. You don't need to change. Those Christmas tales are relics, things preachers talk about, something you dreamed up, some sentimental hankering after the nostalgic memories of the way things used to be. Something to fill the void. All this talk of a virgin birth, angels in the field, guiding stars in the sky, and God

Incarnate, you got caught up in it, but all that is over now. It does not matter anymore. All the Herods of the world say: 'Come back this way!'"

But Christ says, "Something is wrong with going back the same way. Something is missing there, and you know it. Be done with little things. Reach out your hands and souls to claim the rightful prize. Abandon your cautious game plan. Every road sign leading out of Bethlehem, written in Gospel truth, reads, "Go another way!"

It's time to bring in the New. In the book of Revelation it says: "Christ says, 'Behold I make all things new,'" and He does. Think about that. When the dear Christ enters in your home, your heart, and your hopes, you are forever changed and forever new . . . Christ promises that the New Year can be New, indeed. One thing is certain about the Lord: He never leads us backwards. He leads us, as the Wise Men, another way.

Funny thing, for a wee history lesson, it took a long time for the story of the Magi to catch on. For the first century after the death of Jesus, there was no celebration of Christmas at all. They were mainly poor people on the run. They lived in the afterglow of Easter and they expected an immediate return of the Saviour. They had no time for trees and mangers and Christmas pageants.

Then, as the faith broadened, the shepherds' story caught on. Most of the followers of the Christian Way, were hard working honest men and women, modest, not connected to the power centers of the world. For centuries the angels' song and the visit to the Bethlehem stable was the staple of Christmas.

Then, to oversimplify, with the conversion of Constantine and with Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, with Kings and Lords and Ladies coming to church, it was not long before the story of the wealthy Kings, with their royalty and their expensive gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh sounded too good to be true. It authenticated their presence at the stable, too. And more, the Kings and Queens and successful merchants could identify with the search to follow the star.

Why do you think they went? The Wise Men, I mean. Why would perfectly sane, intelligent men pack up their bags, saddle their camels, and go bouncing off following a star in the sky? Can't you imagine their wives wondering what was going on: "You mean you are going to ride all night to follow a star, Belthazar? If I believe that one will you tell me another?" They must have looked silly loading up their gold and frankincense and myrrh, all wrapped up. "What are you going to do with those gifts? . . . For a newborn King? Oh dear. I hope nobody robs you on the way."

But, why do you think they went? I am not sure that I know, but we can guess that something was missing from their lives. They were restless. They had a sense of adventure, maybe. Something they needed they didn't have. They knew the prophecies. The point is: They were looking. Are you listening? They were looking.

Tell me -- or better, tell the Lord: What are you looking for this coming year, and where are you going to find it?

To young people listening (pass the word along), there is always a star to guide you, in symbol. Sometimes it gets dark; teenagers and college students get discouraged, but Christ will never leave you long without His light.

To young couples, your star is there too, beckoning you to marriage, to faithfulness . . . for everything you get in life you give up something else.

To parents and grandparents, the star is there to guide you to put your children first, to enjoy your life -- but while you have them -- to live for them.

To the land of the Middle-Aged when life can begin to settle in, you must believe that the star is there to guide you, too. For the most part we do not believe enough. We do not expect enough. We look for nothing extraordinary or exceptional to happen. We settle in to what is there, not what should be there. Christ can see you through.

To those who are growing older, when longevity begins to catch up with you . . . when morning comes too early . . . when you get a glimpse up over the highest mountain of all . . . how lost you can get without your vision, without the light of Jesus Christ to guide you. A friend of mine once said: "I'm getting excited to find out what's there. I'm really not afraid."

Some of us have New Year's Resolutions to make. If your boat is drifting downstream, the turning of the year is a good time to anchor it to something steady. Scrape off the barnacles, tune up the engine, sweep out the stateroom, polish the brass wheel and get going again. If you are abusing yourself, or if you are drifting away from your ideals, or deserting your dreams, or holding grudges, or whatever . . . get up off your status quo and go another way. If you are angry most all of the time and blow up with the least provocation . . . relax. You do not have to be responsible for all the changes in the world. You don't have to resist everything you do not like. You need to go with the flow. You do not have to throw your weight around or try to get your way . . . with your family, your community, your church, your friends . . . relax.

To some it comes as a push, it goes to others as a promise. "Go another way!" can be an order or an invitation; a demand or an encouragement. If some crashing blow staggered you so that you had to blink your eyes to see at all, there is another way for you now. Or, if it is just that life is changing too fast, stand on tip-toe, but listen to the whisper of God: *"I can still take care of you."*

Others are sitting there saying, "Wait a minute, Reverend, what about me . . . how can my year be new? I have an acute illness . . . I have had a handicap for years, it is not going to go away . . . or, my husband won't be getting any better, or my wife, or my child. . . . How can I find a New Year. . . ?" It will be new, so long as Christ is there. "Do not grieve as if you had no hope," the Bible says, "our God is an everlasting God."

Nietzsche would say you are a fool, fool to trust that up where the road makes the turn, beyond where you and I with our half-blurred, vision can see, where sight succumbs to hope; where our fingers can no longer reach to touch and grasp; fools to think that up there or out there, or in there, there is something, no, Someone, who cares and has the power and the inclination to do something about it. Nietzsche says all there is what you can see and touch and control. But Nietzsche is wrong again, and so is everyone else who would deny us the right to put our hand into the hand of God.

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I called a friend the day after Christmas last week to see how things were going. There has been illness in the family. They are good, old friends. I said, "Did you have a nice Christmas?" He said, "As nice as could be expected, but a terrible thing happened, Ginny's sister died up in Pennsylvania. Although she had been ill, it was unexpected. So, I talked to Ginny. I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Dear. Right on the holiday." She said, "Don't be sorry about that. I'm very sad thinking about the past. I know I am going to miss her, but she went home to see the Lord on His birthday. I think that part is nice. And, He'll take care of her and give her a happy new year."

Loren Eisley tells the story (He is a favorite of mine) about the visit he made to Utah, to the famous observatory. There was an eccentric old astronomer there named Radnor. Every night Radnor peered silently all night long through the heavens, his eye glued to that tremendous telescope. One night Loren got up nerve to interrupt him: "Radnor, what are you looking for out there?" Radnor answered, "I am looking for a missing planet; one that used to be out there between Mars and Jupiter. (The Galileo Probe orbiting Jupiter right now could be helpful, but Radnor and Eisley are both gone now.) "What are you talking about?" Eisley asked. "I never heard about a missing planet. Nobody else I ever met did either."

Radnor barked back, "There are traces of a missing planet all over the universe . . . one day I will find it." Eisley tried once more: "If there is a missing planet out there, why hasn't anybody found it through the past five centuries?" "That is simple," Radnor replied, "no one else ever looked for it. Nobody else is looking for it now." The point is: he was looking . . . for a star. . . .

Hey Radnor . . . what are you looking for out there, hmmm?

"A star."

Do you think you'll find it?

"Oh sure . . . I'll keep looking until I do."

"And being warned of God in a dream . . . they departed to their own country another way." We must, too . . . for now and evermore. Amen.

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