

By Another Road

Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2018

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This is what I remember.

The hum and the churning.

A pan out of place.

Red wires and plastic bags hanging from above and to the right.

A stiff brace. The dim light.

A bottle of water. A cold hand.

Eagles and a prayer.

And also her laugh.

This Advent and Christmas was a strange one for me. For the last thirty years it had evolved into something else. Something more. But it was as if time, running in a giant circle, returned me back to where I began and a fat bearded guy in a red suit once again elevated to the summit of meaning for all things December 25th.

I presume that it had largely to do with my son, Seth. Now nearing three years of age, this was our first Holiday season where he was able to apply his emerging cognitive abilities toward the wonder of imagination and belief. His two Christmas' prior were largely spent in astonishing ignorance, such that the strange and sudden appearance of a pine tree in our living room was no more surprising than the existence of our refrigerator over there in the kitchen corner.

But 2018 was the Christmas that the pagan Claus resurrected. And with him, Frosty the Snowman, Mickey Mouse on Ice, and the rest of his large commercial army. And man, that guy and his cronies just wreaked havoc on our checkbook and our floor space, but worst and most seriously of all, he overshadowed the babe. That beautiful baby once born in a manger.

The stores. The websites. The stores. The shopping. It all just rushed by and the point was lost. The carols went out of tune. The passages out of context. And just getting to the morning and the tree, and the cookies, and the unboxing of all this great stuff was all that mattered, or so I thought.

I mean sure, it was fun. And yes, I got some great memories on tape. And Seth is just so alive now, and beautiful, and seeing it through his eyes was a true Gift. It was. But still, there was something I wasn't yet seeing. Something I wasn't any longer feeling. And whatever I was feeling felt misplaced, somewhat shallow, and unnervingly hollow.

Ab, don't be such a buzzkill some of my more secular friends tell me. Enjoy every minute of it. You'll never get this back. As they age, it just becomes more routine and less magical. And anyway, didn't those kings or wise men or whoever in your story, your book, once bring gifts themselves to Jesus? Or were those only lyrics to that radio song?

Now, have you ever considered why? That is, why these particular gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh were brought to baby J? A practical explanation, harbored in Psychology Today, suggests that gold was given to help the family with financial security for the early days of the child's trying infancy; and that frankincense and myrrh, both common treatments in ancient times, were administered at the moment of birth as healing agents; myrrh as a sort of Morphine-Heparin combo to numb Mary's pain and clot her blood, and frankincense as a sort of Valium-Prozac concoction, to ward off her and the child's fresh anxiety as they entered their new waking reality.

Now perhaps you already knew all that, and had known it for some time, but I didn't, at least that bit about frankincense and myrrh. And, to own the truth, when I got to Seminary I had no real theological understanding of the three gifts either. So one day, I got courage enough to embarrass myself in front of my more aware and pious friends, and ask my New Testament professor what the gifts' meanings were. His answer, now so obvious and simple, was nonetheless elegant. Gold for a king (obvious is obvious); frankincense for a priest (priests employed the incense in their worship and at sacred offerings); and myrrh for a prophet (myrrh oil was used in the holy anointing of those especially called by God with the gift of the tongue, think Psalm 45). So Jesus, the preeminent governor of these three offices (prophet, priest, and King), had each materially and symbolically transferred over to him at the horizon of his birth. For in him, the magi recognized the greatness of his power and the manifestation of true Divinity.

The gift of myrrh though was perhaps the most striking, this professor went on to say. For not only did it harken back to the psalmist's vision of one whose lips were anointed by God's grace (Psalm 45:2) but it also reminisced of the oil used to embalm a body at death. Which was admittedly curious, in that one of the gifts presented to the baby would also be a symbol of his later demise. But what if, I thought, what if it wasn't a symbol foreshadowing Jesus' moment on the cross, but what if it was a signpost to the coming destruction of the principalities that would attempt to encircle and kill him (Herod, most notably just some verses later), that would themselves be ultimately vanquished when Jesus conquered the grave leaving behind an empty tomb.

Either way, it seems these Gentile magi knew what was up. For not only did they just nail the right gifts to give him, not to mention the exact star to observe and how precisely to follow it, but when they first came before Herod, they instantly knew that he was a fraud, and refused to bow down before him (v.2-3). Think about that: the magi, from some gentile nothing land to the east, travelled to Jerusalem, the very center of power, and in a stunningly defiant act, heralded in a new uprising that would disrupt the power already in place. And they did it right to its very face, amidst all of its extravagance and royalty and abundant stuff! And to top it off, they told this pseudo-king, this shallow apparition of claimed-divinity, that they had instead come to pay homage to a real king, the true son of God, who is to be made incarnate not in a palace, but in an insignificant blip of a town called Bethlehem; in yet a crying little baby, born to a young fragile girl named Mary, and an ashamed older husband named Joseph (1:19).

So there would be no pomp,
no lavish parties, and pre-parties,
no priests or scribes there to celebrate.
No, he would instead be surrounded by lowly cattle and their excrement,
and would be delivered into a crummy wooden manger
where livestock knelt and ate their feed.

You see,

You don't find God where the world has installed him.

You find God where the world would never think to look twice.

This is what I'll remember then.

The hum and the churning.

A pan out of place.

Red wires and plastic bags hanging from above and to the right.

A stiff brace. The dim light.

A bottle of water. A cold hand.

Eagles and a prayer.

But mostly her laugh.

On New Year's Eve, I went to the hospital. And there in a room, in the middle of a hallway, below a pile of covers, I found Him. Who I hadn't been seeing. What I wasn't feeling. I found Him. Fresh off a Christmas season where everything seemed skewed and tilted and the Spirit conspicuously absent, I found who I was overlooking right there in that room.

With her. With Betsy.

Amidst the machinery and low hum of all that all makes a room like that a hospital room, there they were. Together. I should have known better. I should have known He'd be there, in the margins and manger places, and not everywhere else where I was so previously consumed. That He was born to inhabit just this kind of space.

She could barely move, her brace keeping her neck and head stiff as a board. I held a bottle of water up to her mouth and she drank for a little. Her right hand was, at that point, cold and without feeling. She asked me to hold and massage it. I called the nurses. We moved some wires. We talked about the Eagles making the playoffs. And we prayed. Somehow, in that room, tethered to all that stuff, she saw beyond it. Beyond it all. She joked and she laughed. And said she was thankful to Him for all that she had. And for all of you. For what's life without friends, she asked. And so she called herself blessed for having all that mattered in this life. Friendship, His presence, and love.

I thought, this is what an epiphany feels like.

Paul wrote: "Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring the news of the boundless riches of Christ; and to make everyone see what is the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things (Ephesians 3:8-9)."

My friends, in 2019, I've resolved to remember, and look twice and again.

Amen.