

## “On the Road to Bethlehem”

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Micah 5:1-5

Matt. 2:1-9

‘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.’ Micah 5:2

Let us pray... O God,

Bless us on our journeys to our own private Bethlehems  
as well as the journey we make together as a congregation  
to seek out the child in need. Amen

This is the season of Advent – the season of Adven-ture!

Adventures are about going somewhere – and getting there!  
There is a purpose and a goal involved with adventures.  
A pilgrimage is such an example of an adventure.

The purpose of a pilgrimage is generally to visit a shrine  
for the purpose of paying homage,  
or for the remembering of some great achievement,  
or for the *achieving* of spiritual insight.

That last part is tough, because you can’t really expect that  
a physical journey you plan will automatically coincide  
with the spiritual geography of your heart.

Spiritual insights don’t happen on your schedule –  
they can’t.

It’s when things go wrong and you have to find your way back home–  
that’s when a spiritual adventure begins!

And we are all about that!

Think of it – only a few short months ago,  
we of the UCC at The Villages made our kadimah-pilgrimage  
from Temple Shalom to our present location.

And if you recall, the county inspectors held up our ‘C.O.’ –  
‘certificate of occupancy’ causing us to hold off from  
entering the building when we planned.

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But then we had to go the following week –  
we were committed by our publicity and invitations...

We had to go that next Sunday – August 15<sup>th</sup>  
which so happens is a Catholic holy day  
venerating Mary the mother of Jesus.

As it turned out, Jerry Fabian – with experience as a union rep,  
worked out an agreement with those inspectors  
who issued that C.O. by noon on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Faith trumped bad luck!

Consider our Gospel lesson today,

Usually we talk about the Magi, or the Three Kings  
at Christmas-time itself or later at Epiphany,  
but you have to remember,  
travelers then would've had to start their journey months before.  
It would be like walking to Washington, DC.

The magi were on their way to pay homage  
to the Messiah of the Jewish people –  
but they didn't know exactly where they were going!  
Can you imagine how pleased their wives were  
when they finally stopped to ask for directions?  
Of course by that time they were in Jerusalem!

However, this set up a whole new dynamic –  
as the engine of envy was activated in the heart of  
King Herod the potentate of the Jewish people.  
Herod the Great was agitated at this news of the long-awaited Messiah  
and could see no further than this representing  
an immediate threat to him politically.

The 3 Kings were now on an adventure to save the Christ child!

That is roughly the storyline of the film “Three Godfathers” –  
in which three men on a journey are obligated to help  
a newborn child to safety.

Director John Ford did three versions of this narrative on film,  
placing it in the Old West where three outlaws are thwarted  
in their escape from a bank robbery  
and they are forced to go deep into the desert to find water.

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They get to a well, but find that it has gone dry –  
and they also find a wagon with a dying woman  
who is about to give birth.

She names the baby after each of them before she passes on  
and these three “godfathers” commit themselves  
to saving the baby’s life – even though it will cost them  
freedom and life itself in the process.

In our society, we tend to take children for granted –  
even as a kind of burden.

They are unpredictable, careless, and sometimes dangerously so –  
but children’s problems are also a reflection of society’s troubles.

When something happens they are the first to be affected  
and with them, everything gets magnified.

Yet it is not until we get to know children – like anyone else,  
that we are challenged to have empathy.

We are called into the adventure of helping children find their way.

Another movie, “Children of Men” - a recent one, has a similar theme,  
but set in a grim future when humanity had lost the ability  
to have babies.

The world is thrown into an apocalyptic chaos  
as the remaining organized authorities violently  
arrest, confine, and deport refugees.

A group of rebels however discover a pregnant, refugee woman  
and try to use her and the child to support their cause -  
though their leader seeks help from her ex-husband, Theo,  
a disenchanted everyman to get this woman & child to safety,  
to a mysterious group called The Human Project.

It is a harrowing film that nevertheless is a powerful affirmation  
of the hope that children bring to us all for a better future.

The call to adventure – the call to rescue the child out of the wasteland  
is both symbolic and literal.

Now, as in times past, it is necessary to encourage the next generation  
despite the heralds of gloom and doom.

We as a church have a real opportunity to do that  
through the Wildwood tutoring program or any number of ways  
to be supportive of youth, teachers, and parents.

But the child to be saved can also be the one within you.

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The world can overwhelm us financially, medically, emotionally,  
and spiritually.

But Christmas comes to remind us of the hope  
that we have company on this road of life.

God was willing to be part of our 'human project'  
and risk being as vulnerable as a little baby.

God through Christ has participated in the joy and pain  
of being human and that as bad as it gets,  
the affirming life force of God will prevail.

[Jesus said,]...

'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children,  
you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' Matt. 18:3

And Frederick Franck who is an artist/writer said,

We have two options as we grow older:  
to become more childlike – or more childish.

The child within is who you really are –

it is that which is uniquely you and at the same time,  
the divine spark, the Cosmic Christ, the I Am That I Am,  
the image of God that we all share.

And if we recognize that this is the lowest common denominator of  
what is most valuable in the universe

and that this is within each of us,  
we can also recognize it in others and value them –  
to love and care for one another as we would be, too.

And we will be like those who carry the helpless baby  
through the wasteland –

and like the wisemen who protected Christ.

So, this Christmas, let the Christ-Child be born again  
within you and know that the road to Bethlehem  
is only the beginning of the adventure.

Amen

*Micah is in the tradition of those prophets  
who stood for the true worship of God and for social justice.  
This is the text that the chief priests and scribes  
quote to Herod the Great when the magi arrive in Jerusalem...*

Micah 5:1-5a

5:1 Now you are walled around with a wall; siege is laid against us;  
with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.

2 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.

3 Therefore he shall give them up until the time  
when she who is in labour has brought forth;  
then the rest of his kindred shall return  
to the people of Israel.

4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord,  
in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God.

And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth; 5 and he shall be the one of peace...

Matthew 1b-9a

2:1 ... wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking,

‘Where is the child who has been born  
king of the Jews?’

For we observed his star at its rising,  
and have come to pay him homage.’

3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened,  
and all Jerusalem with him;

4and calling together all the chief priests  
and scribes of the people,

he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

5They told him,

‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd\* my people Israel.” ’

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men  
and learned from them the exact time  
when the star had appeared.

8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying,

‘Go and search diligently for the child;  
and when you have found him,

bring me word so that I may also go and  
pay him homage.’

9 When they had heard the king, they set out...