***“BY ANOTHER WAY”***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno, Jan. 5, 2025*

*based on Matthew 2:1-12*

Well, today is Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany is the traditional arrival day of the magi to Bethlehem; men who are guided to the little town by a star.

Remember Dave Barry? – I miss his syndicated columns, especially at this time of year. Here is what he once had to say about the part of the Christmas story we look into this morning –

*Although this is a festive time of year, it can also be a difficult and stressful time for a certain group … in our society. That group is: men.*

Hang in there with me, now. Don’t just, you know, tune out.

*This problem dates back to the very first Christmas. We know from the Bible that the Wise Men showed up in Bethlehem and gave the baby Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Now, gold is always a nice gift, but frankincense and myrrh - at least according to my dictionary - are gum resins. Who gives gum resins to a baby?*

*The answer is: men. The Wise Men, being men, didn't even START shopping for gifts until the last minute, when most of the stores in the greater Bethlehem area were closed for Christmas Eve . . . So the Wise Men showed up at the manger, handed their baby gifts to Mary, and headed for the eggnog.*

*Mary looked at the gifts - which were not wrapped, nor were they accompanied by cards - rolled her eyes, tossed the gum resins to the goats, and said: "Next Christmas, we are going to have some gift-giving RULES.*

*But the Wise Men didn't hear her, because by then they were over by the crib trying to teach the Baby Jesus to pull their index finger.*

Okay, to be serious, I remember so well my visit to Bethlehem in 1999.

That day, before tensions between Israelis and Palestinians began to rise due to the intifada, a visitor (who reads the Bible more literally than I do) could still imagine an impossibly young Palestinian girl filled with holy purpose, riding a donkey down that little town’s one main street with her new husband, a man old enough to be her father, the both of them looking desperately, by starlight, for “the” only hotel in town.

My own visit there seemed anything but momentous. I and the group I was travelling with, took our time to examine the original flagstones in the floor of the church planted there under the direction of Emperor Constantine’s mother, St. Helena, in the fourth century. *This* was one old church.

We then made our way down below the central altar to the even older grotto where tradition has long held that the baby was supposed to have been born. I remember being moved most, not by that, but by the humble cell, still there, where St. Jerome translated the Greek Bible into Latin in the fourth century.

That cell stands just a handful of steps away from the traditional location of the original manger. How remarkable for one like him to work and worship there daily, hourly, minute by minute. It must have been like living in the middle of a meditation.

But nothing prepared me for what I saw when I came back up to the level of the church.

Rapidly lengthening shadows eclipsed the intense sunlight that only a moment before had been streaming through the rear doors. This was followed by the sound of dozens of swift steps on stone. A dozen, then three-dozen figures, all in black, entered the church followed by four men carrying a very plane wooden coffin. The sound of it being placed down on the stone floor before the altar was startling, deep and dry.

All at once I realized that I wasn’t in a museum. This was a living church. Though there were thirty or more of us tourists, milling about the place, the worshipers, obviously moved by this one’s passing, ignored us as best they could.

No doubt about it, this was a faithful, tight Christian community very much in mourning.

Feeling terribly obtrusive, I wanted to just disappear into the mortar between the stones. Still, I was transfixed. How perfect, I thought.

The integrity of the church at Bethlehem, was, in that moment, clear for anyone with eyes to see. I found out later that it is the oldest continuously operating church in Christendom

Two thousand years along, this ancient shrine was faithfully celebrating a Christian’s life and death. In a few minutes the service was over, and, just as swiftly, the mourners hurried out, on their way to the local cemetery to tuck away their loved one.

That’s the way they do it in Palestine – all in one day.

How ironic, I thought. Bethlehem, the place of Christ’s birth, had given me a glimpse of what a truly holy death should look like.

A holy birth and a holy death; what are they separated by? A few steps. But looking at Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth – it’s not strange at all.

Christmas is barely eleven days gone, and here, in this gospel, just twelve verses past the nativity, is the insertion of the story of King Herod’s massacre of the boy babies in Bethlehem.

King Herod “The Great,” threatened by talk of a new king, will order the killing of all the boy babies around the little town.

It’s an old story, very much in contrast with “O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see they lie.” Still, but simmering.

Matthew’s Christmas pageant ends not with tinsel covered angels proclaiming goodwill to all human beings, but “Rachel weeping for her children.” So very sad, but also sadly appropriate for this particular Christmas as we remember the children of Gaza and the West Bank.

Christmas in Bethlehem, the real Bethlehem. What dirty shepherds saw as a mere baby, Herod believed to be a threat to everything on which his kingdom was based.

Okay, let me back up for a moment. It is very doubtful that this part of the story actually happened. However … despots have been killing children for millennia, so in that sense, this *is* a very “true” story.

You can exchange the name, Herod, for a host of other dictators of our age, Putin, Xi Jinping, Milosevic, Mubarak, Kaddhaffi, Netanyahu, Assad of Syria. These are all men who cannot imagine not being “king.”

“Geez,” we say to ourselves, “if only Herod, and all the other men of power like him, could only go gracefully, and not take a million or so innocent people with them before they go down.”

Yeah, but consider this. Have you not, at least once in your life, held on to something too long? You know what I’m saying?

For one reason or another, you didn’t think you could live without something, maybe. You didn’t want … to give up.

We all compromise our ethics or are tempted to, at least --

For something; something we look back at now and wonder, “What was I thinking?”

Maybe we were stuck in something -- a job, a relationship, a bad habit.

We were deeply unhappy and desperately needing to break out of it, but we just couldn’t do it … until …. You fill in the blank.

That is, as the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor tells it, at the heart of the story of the wise men from the east. They are stuck and then, with a little cosmic direction, they break out of their old stale ways of doing everything, and go looking for new ways to live. Here is their story as she tells it:

*Once upon a time there were three, yes three very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each one of them.*

*It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.*

*Each in his own country had tried books, tried magic, tried astrology and reflexology. One had spent his entire fortune learning how to read and write runes. Another lived on nothing but dried herbs boiled in water. The third could walk on hot coals but it did nothing for him beyond the great sense of relief he felt at the end.*

*They were all glad for a reason to get out of town – because that was clearly where the star was calling them, out – away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns.*

*And so they set out one by one, each believing that he was the only one with a star in his eye, until they all ran into one another on the road to Jerusalem.*

*From a distance each thought the other to be a mirage at first, a twinkling reflection made out of vapor and heat. But as they drew near to one another they saw the star they had in common and it was like a tattoo, or a secret handshake, that made them brothers before they spoke. They were unanimous that the star was leading them to Jerusalem, which made perfect sense, since they had every reason to believe they were on their way to meet a king.*

*They had no trouble gaining entrance to the palace. They looked rich and that was enough to get them a royal audience, only the king they met was something of a disappointment.*

*He was old and fat and had terrible breath. His skin was yellow, as if his bile had gotten the best of him, and the guards on either side of him shook so that their spears jingled against their shields. Without even conferring with one another, the wise men knew he was not the one, so they asked him if he knew of any other kings in the general area.*

*He had been picking at his fingernails until then, but their question seemed to get his attention in a big way. He looked right at them for the first time, and when he saw the stars in their eyes, his own eyes grew perfectly round like the eyes of a snake.*

*Asking the wise men if they would please excuse him for a moment,
the king stepped into his chapel to confer with his clergy, who whipped out their concordances and told him what he wanted to know. Yes, there was a little something in the book of Micah, about a new ruler for Israel, but nothing to get excited about. It had been there a long time. It seemed unlikely, but sure, why not? Send the wise men to Bethlehem to do the reconnaissance work, and save a little bit on the national security budget.*

*So that was what the king did. He gargled combed his hair, and went back to tell the wise men they should go to Bethlehem at once, with his blessing, on the condition that they come back and tell him who his successor was so he could send flowers. His breath smelled like Pine-Sol and the wise men left feeling queasy, but once they were back out in the night air they could see the star clearly again and followed it right to the doorway of a one-room house in Bethlehem.*

*It was a perfectly nice place, modest but well built. It was just not the kind of place they expected to find a king. A dog was sniffing the woodpile under the eaves in hopes of a mouse. Someone was practicing the lute next door, going over the same phrase again and again.*

*The smell of dinner was still in the air – wheat cakes cooked on a griddle greased with sheep’s fat, lentils with lots of garlic and rice. If they had chosen the place themselves they might never have knocked, but the star had chosen it, so they did, and when the door opened the couple inside almost died of fright.*

*Not that the wise men noticed. With their arms full of gifts, they crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters and snagging their robes on the rough furniture. All they could see was the baby, who was NOT afraid, and whose right eye shown with the same star they had seen before they ever left home.*

*It was he, then, whoever he was. They did not have a clue, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and worshipped him. Then they gave him the things they had brought him – all the wrong things, they could see now, things he had no use for. They should have brought goat’s milk, a warm blanket, something shiny to hang above the crib, only how could they have guessed.*

*The child’s parents were gracious. They thanked the foreigners for their gifts, and held them up for the baby to see. Then to the wise men’s complete alarm, the child’s mother picked him up and handed him around so that each one of them held that damp, soft living weight in his arms. Then she took him back and nursed him until they all fell asleep where they sat.*

*In the morning the wise men could not find their stars anywhere. They looked in all the corners and under the chairs. The baby’s mother even shook out his blankets but after an initial panic the wise men said never mind, they did not need them anymore. They had found what they were looking for and could not lose it. As much as they hated to, they guessed they had better be on their way.*

*No, they would not be going back through Jerusalem, they said. All three of them had a dream that said, steer clear of Jerusalem, as if they needed to be told.*

*If anyone in Jerusalem knew anything at all, they would be here instead of there. Besides, none of their old maps worked anymore.*

*They would find a new way home. So the wise men picked up their packs, which were lighter than before, and then they lined up in front of the baby to thank him for gifts he had given them. “What in world are you talking about,” said the baby’s mother, laughing, and they told her so she could tell him later.*

*“For this home and the love here,” said the first wise man, who’s own childhood home was anything but adoring.*

*“For the smell of a baby,” said the second who had decided not to live on boiled herbs anymore.*

*“For a really great story,” said the third wise man, who thought telling it to others might do him a lot more good than walking on coals.*

*Then the wise men trooped outside, stretched, kissed the baby and went home by another way. (“Home By Another Way” Barbara Brown Taylor p. 27).*

Amen