

Sermon by the Rector
Second Sunday after Christmas Year B
January 4, 2009

[Jeremiah 31:7-14](#)
[Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a](#)
[or Matthew 2:1-12](#)
[Psalm 84 or 84:1-8](#)

Christmas Season is full of comings and goings, gatherings and scatterings. As the season began, many of us enjoyed comings and gatherings; now, we're a little sad about - and maybe a little relieved by - the goings and scatterings.

Each Bible reading today makes reference to this phenomenon. Jeremiah says God will gather his scattered people. Psalm 84 speaks of those whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way, the faces set toward some great gathering in the temple at Jerusalem. And Paul, writing to the Ephesians, encourages his readers with an evocation of the great and final gathering of God's people being prepared even now in that place beyond space and time, where God dwells. The Wise Men have come, and are beginning their journey home.

Mary and Joseph came, too, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and the angels gathered in the shepherds from the fields. Soon Mary and Joseph will return to Nazareth, and the shepherds to their work of caring for the sheep.

And when they get back to where they came from, each group will probably find that nothing at all has changed. The Nazarene tongues that wagged about Mary's pregnancy will still be wagging. The Israelite society that disdained the shepherds before, viewing them as dirty people doing dirty work, unfit for polite society, will continue to see them in exactly the same way. And the people of the unnamed locale in the East from which the Wise Men hail will be asking the gossipy question that entertain them and make the heavy burdens of their hard lives a little easier to bear: Where did these guys go? Why were they gone so long? What were they doing all that time? And why did they take that valuable gold and perfume and ointment with them and leave it behind?

How well we know these stories. We scatter ourselves and gather again, come and go, repeatedly. We take journeys of many kinds: the daily one to work and back, weekly trips to church, travels to see family, the every-four-year trip to the polling place to vote for a candidate for the presidency (how diminished is this pilgrimage, though, by the ease with which we can vote absentee) and to DC, in person or through some form of media, to witness the new president's inauguration. And almost invariably, when we return from these travels, we find the same issues, problems and challenges, some of them entrenched and intractable, at the place from which we departed. This is sometimes most vivid for churchgoers in the contrast between the joy and uplift we feel after a worship service and the annoyances, or worse, of family and work life that we encounter on Sunday afternoon or Monday morning – or even the irritations of church politics we encounter in a meeting right after worship ends.

Here's what we forget: in God's universe, the pilgrim changes, not the place from which the pilgrim comes. The one taking the journey changes, not the set of circumstances from which he or she sets forth. We scatter, we gather, and we're different. And this change almost always occurs by virtue of what the traveler leaves behind in the course of the journey.

Think of the Wise Men. They left something concrete behind, at the Bethlehem manger – gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Recognizing the source of all wisdom in the child before their eyes, though, they also left behind something perhaps even more precious to them: their sense of being the bearers and stewards of secret and mysterious knowledge from the East. What they had studied years to acquire as an exclusive possession, this child would make known to the whole world, even these rude and unlettered shepherds. They left a piece of themselves behind, and they were changed.

We may not think of ourselves as bearers of mysterious wisdom. But we all think we have a kind of proprietary insight into certain realities. "Here, in this place" – this family, this office, this church – "I know what's going on." And we might add, "and I'll share my knowledge only with those who show themselves worthy to receive it." Whenever we go on a journey, be it geographic, emotional, or spiritual, God requires us to leave behind some piece of this private, proud, proprietary wisdom, as the Wise Men did at the manger. "Maybe I don't know quite as much as I thought I did. Maybe

others have more to teach me than I thought they did." We leave a piece of ourselves behind, and we are changed.

Think of Mary and Joseph. Mary came to Bethlehem holding the divine life within her own body. When she returned to Nazareth the child had been born, and belonged not just to her but to the world. She left a piece of herself behind, and she was changed.

We, too, have experiences that we hold within the intimate recesses of ourselves. These might be those rawest and most immediate of emotions I spoke of last week, things not subject to explanation or even language: grief and joy, love and anger. But when we undertake geographic or emotional or spiritual journeys, some of these most intimately-held realities emerge into the light of day, and belong not only to ourselves but to others. We leave a piece of ourselves behind, and we are changed.

Think of the shepherds. They were, as I mentioned before, seen as dirty people doing a dirty job, unfit for polite company. They might have internalized and even nurtured this idea of themselves, cultivating an "outcast" or "rebel" identity. Coming in from the fields to behold the child, though, and share the important message they'd received about him, they found themselves part of something – not outsiders or rebels or outcasts at all. Returning to their sheepfolds, they left a piece of this (perhaps) carefully-cultivated identity behind, and they were changed.

Sound familiar? Haven't we all toyed with, or even indulged ourselves in, the romance of the outsider as a way of thinking of ourselves? And hasn't something then reminded us that, perhaps in spite of ourselves, we're very much a part of things – of a family, a community, a nation? As it turns out we've been on a journey, from the fields to the manger, and God has required us to leave the "outcast" piece of ourselves behind. We have been changed.

At the end of pilgrimages long and short, forbidding challenges and even intractable problems await us, unchanged from the time of our departure. But we ourselves, the pilgrims, are changed by our journeys. We, like the Wise Men, Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds, leave something precious behind, at the feet of the infant king. As is always the case with the God we have come to know through Christ, it's the surrendering that transforms us.