

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC
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After All the Visitors Have Gone Home
Luke 2:20, Matthew 2:12

The visitors went home. That's what the scriptures say today. That's it; at least on the surface. The shepherds and the Magi went home. But there is a lot that is left unsaid too. One thing unsaid is that the family was finally left alone.

We who have been hosting visitors, and who have been visitors, for Christmas and New Year celebrations, can certainly relate to this moment- after the visitors have gone home. When we are the visitors, we may be glad to finally be on our way home. We go home to sleep in our own beds, to enjoy our own space. When we have had visitors we may be glad to get things cleaned up and put away, to get our own space to ourselves, to let our hair down and put our feet up.

But there is more here. The shepherds didn't just go home. The scriptures say, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." If we exclude the angels who came to tell them of Jesus' birth, the shepherds are the world's first evangelists!

The Magi on the other hand, have difficulty. They cannot go home openly. What they have seen and know is dangerous knowledge. They must go home by another road. Perhaps they foreshadow the persecution that followers of Jesus will experience. Or perhaps more simply, they represent the difficulty of telling the

story in places where it is not welcomed, the difficulty of living out the story in a society, then and now, that is fixated on materialism, violence, and selfishness, and is closed to the good news of justice and peace for all people.

And then there is the Holy family. For the first time perhaps, they are alone with a new born baby. Does he sleep through the night? Those of you who are parents, might understand this moment- the moment of realizing you are the new parents, responsible for this new life. Everyone else has gone home!

After all the anticipation, and the wondrous event of the birth and visits from everyone, Joseph and Mary have to get down to real every day living. Not easy things then or now, especially among peasant people. They must find a way to make a home for the child, work to earn food and shelter, protect him, keep him safe and warm, teach him, and love him. Parenting, perhaps the most difficult job of all, especially every day. No matter how much support they have from family, friends, their village, they may sometimes feel alone in the daunting responsibility.

As scary as being new parents might be, Mary and Joseph are unique. For they are also alone with the revelations they have received. The shepherds came to visit telling a story of visitation by angels. The message of the angels: “Do not be afraid”, “good news of great joy for all people: in the city of David is born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” And the Magi came bearing gifts fit for a king during a time when “kings” murdered their own sons to eliminate future

competition. The scriptures tell us that Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. We don't know what Joseph thought or did with them. We do know that Mary was there with Jesus until the end, and we certainly can imagine that Joseph did the best he could to be a good father to Jesus.

It is our tradition each year to anticipate, remember, commemorate and celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Savior, who is Christ the King, the Messiah. And it is a good and right thing we do. It is a special time set aside- a time out of time.

More important is to ask what do we do with it the rest of the year? Is it just a pretty story or are we supposed to do something out of it? Think about it.

Which of the people in the story have you related to in your life? Which of these people do you see in your daily life at home, and perhaps here at church too? These people represent three different types of people, three different spiritual types, and three different approaches to being here together as a church. Do you relate to the shepherds- are you ready to glorify and praise God for all you have heard and seen? Are you ready to go out and evangelize- to spread the good news?

Perhaps you relate more to the Magi, going about your life in a way that witnesses to the story, living out justice and peace. Going and doing the things that bring about the kingdom of God. Even taking the risk in a society that may persecute you for being a follower of Jesus?

Or perhaps you relate more to Mary and Joseph, caring for your family, being a good mother or father. Perhaps you feel called to provide food and shelter, protection, education, and love, to be the support to family, friends, and your church, so they do not feel alone? To be the ones who keep the home fires burning, a warm and safe place for the shepherds and Magi to come home.

Perhaps who you relate to most over time has changed as you have heard and celebrated the story year after year. Where is it that you are at this moment, after all the visitors have gone home? And where will you go next in your life, after experiencing once again the new born king?

As we begin the new year, a new decade, and a search for a new pastor, it is a good time for us to consider where we are and where we are going, both individually and as a church. How many of you have made resolutions for the new year? In a devotion I read the author talked about making three resolutions¹ - healthy, wealthy and wise- one commitment to help you be healthier, one that will help you use you gifts in better and more faithful ways, and one that will educate you or otherwise improve your wisdom. These are good resolutions for both individuals and the church family together.

But the author advocated that before we make resolutions to improve our lives and our world, we first we should begin by imaging the goal at the end. What

¹ Rev. Quinn G. Caldwell, Old South Church, Boston Massachusetts, online UCC Still Speaking Devotion

will we and our world be like when we keep these resolutions? Imagine what it will look like, what it will taste like, how we will feel.

Then, before we settle on the resolutions, before we claim the vision, there are two things we need to do. The first is to remind ourselves we don't and cannot do it alone. The second is to acknowledge the One who gives us the vision, the One who is at the center of all the celebrating, visiting, and going home.

Where ever we are on our journey, whether we are shepherds evangelizing, the Magi living out justice and peace, or the ones preparing the safe place, protecting, nurturing and supporting, the one thing we all have in common is the revelation we have received.

God loves us. God demonstrated that love in a tiny child, a Healer, Teacher, a Savior, so long ago. God came to dwell among us. And God continues to demonstrate that love and dwell among us every day. And the truth about this revelation is that we haven't really received it unless it changes our lives, each and every time we receive it. Has it changed you? How will it change your life and how will it change how we are church together this year?

Now that all the visitors have gone home, may we receive the revelation and be changed. May it be so. Amen.