

Carrying On
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *Our truest life is when we are in dreams awake.*

Henry David Thoreau

Hebrew Scripture Reading: Isaiah 60:1-

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.
Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant;
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, 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." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon: Carrying On

Let's start with a little post-Christmas survey. This is not a quiz. It is a survey. You will know the answers and none are wrong.

Whose Christmas tree is still up? Whose wreathes, outdoor decorations and lights are still up? How about indoor decorations or plants other than the tree? Now, with regard to all those things, who has a tradition about WHEN they should be put up or taken down (rather than all these decorating options being a function of travel and convenience)?

I was surprised at the number of Christmas trees already at the curb when I returned to town the day after Christmas. Perhaps, I shouldn't have been, given that my evening walks with the pooch revealed that many of them had gone up, not on Thanksgiving weekend, but on All Saints Day. I confess to my limited experience with holidays. I have never eaten Thanksgiving dinner in front of the Christmas tree ☺ Yet, from folk here, I received an impressive number of messages this year from people in a panic at the lateness of their tree decorating.

I remember "Christmas" lasting longer when I was young. I had the good fortune to live within twenty miles of almost 70 members of my extended family. In our house, the holidays began on Christmas Eve when we put up the Christmas tree. (Until my brother was in elementary school Santa brought the tree Christmas Eve night, along with the presents.) Christmas Eve night was at a great-aunt's with many of those relatives. My great-grandmother made homemade donuts; my great-aunt invented sliders; and she always gave all the kids some kind of puzzle toy that had us sitting in the stairwell occupied for hours. As we got older and acquired our own apartments and homes, she included us in the list of those who received one of her handmade ornaments—she made over a hundred each year. If you were going to get engaged or announce your engagement, that party is where it happened.

Christmas Day was gifts in the morning; dinner in the afternoon at one grandmother's with aunts, uncles and cousins; Christmas night, a buffet with the other side of the family (many of whom we had just seen the night before.) My father didn't work that week and our days developed a rhythm: Mornings at home were spent playing with toys, reading gift books or writing thank you notes to those who had sent gifts, but whom we had not seen to thank personally. Gifts we returned to their place under the tree until the end of the holiday. There was a "jewelry exception" to that rule—an exception I am pretty sure my mother initiated ☺ Afternoons and evenings were filled with the exchange of visits—simple visits to admire trees and decorations, taste someone else's cookies, and spend time with cousins and second cousins once removed.

New Year's Eve was spent with neighbors; New Year's morning began with breakfast out. In the afternoon, we took down the tree and put gifts in their permanent homes. As I got older, I had more responsibility, but the days had a more leisurely feel for children and adults than they do today. We left the holiday behind with a sense of appreciation and comfort days and some slight sadness that they were over for another year.

Everyone here has both their own current practices and memories of traditions they had—which are no longer happening because of family changes, moves and the fact that some traditions should just be let go. It's not clear that we are developing new traditions to take their place which may leave a bigger hole in our lives than the passing of old ones. Most of the messages I receive now are a quite different post-holiday experience—people expressing gladness that it is over for another year, while lamenting the drudgery of the de-decorating.

For a holiday we look forward to, and for which we plan, cook, bake, buy gifts, prepare greetings, make travel arrangements and buy tickets and entertain, it rivals only a wedding day for the expense and amount of effort that goes into a few hour production—except that this is an annual event.

Surely, for an event, a holiday so important to us personally and spiritually, there should be more joy and less exhaustion. Surely, for an event, a holiday so important to us personally and

spiritually, we should be able to carry on into the future joy, possibility and wonder beyond those few moments on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning.

The church's calendar encourages and can model for us ways we might make our Christmas celebrations more a way of life than an endurance contest. Here, while the outdoor wreathes came down sometime last week, our shared tree and decorations still grace the Sanctuary. While we may think that is for the convenience of the de-decorators, it is actually liturgically appropriate to keep the decorations up this long. As it happens, even though most of us have returned to work or school, yesterday was the last, the twelfth, day of Christmas.

Today, Epiphany, marks our remembrance of the arrival of visitors from the east at the manger. If we had forgotten until we arrived this morning, our opening hymn reminded us. Still, today can often feel like Christmas leftovers—the last alleluia before we put the Holy Family in their cotton wrappings and store all the lights and decorations for another year.

If that's how we are feeling, we might want to emphasize a different element of this story than we often do. Usually we focus on the three—or the star—or the gifts. What if we took a lesson from the likely amount of time that elapsed between the birth and the visit?

The faith tradition has based a lot on a relatively few words in Scripture. Matthew numbers only the gifts given to the Jesus. He does not number the visitors. It will be church tradition that allows the gifts to define the number of visitors. That same tradition will later give names to those three "wise men" – Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar from Persia, India and Egypt respectively. Apparently, they were either all at a wise men conference or they saw the star at different times; otherwise it is highly unlikely people from such widespread locations would have arrived in Jerusalem (their first stop) at the same time. Because of the time it would have taken them to travel to the city once they saw the natal star – after all, even a star that stops in the sky is still lighting a whole lot of ground—it was likely nearly two years after the after Jesus' birth before they fussed the target and spiraled in on Bethlehem and the holy family. During the journey, their lives would have been filled with starlight, curiosity and hope as they looked for the baby long after Christmas Day.

This isn't a suggestion that we take two years off to travel widely, or that we don't need to accommodate changing household needs. You know me well enough by now to know that while it is right and good that we honor the richness of our memories and feel comfort at the nostalgia for other days and people no longer with us, I'd be the last person to suggest that we turn back the clock or try to impose old ways on new lives.

What paying attention to the time the wise men took for the journey, remembering that all the time they were keeping their eyes open for signs about and of the baby, can remind us that we need to keep looking; keep paying attention; keep our curiosity alive about when and where the child might appear –all of which can help us keep our hope and joy alive, rather than packing them away and letting them gather dust with the rest of the decorations. We need to find ways for carrying on the search for the Christ Child long after the day in ways that work in our day and time.

As I was chatting with friends and family about their holidays, I asked what was the best moment. One friend answered that she and her husband had given their three year old granddaughter a baby doll for Christmas. She was absolutely delighted with her baby and clung to it. About half an hour later, my friend asked her granddaughter if she had thought of a name for her baby.

"Baby Jesus."

My friend said, "So now Baby Jesus is a girl being carried all over creation. Sometimes Baby Jesus is carried in a baby carrier in front; sometimes in a back pack; sometimes just trailing around her feet. Baby Jesus is always being kissed and burped." A little girl has found a way to carry on Christmas, carrying the Baby Jesus all over creation and she has managed to do it in a way that will help her family carry on Christmas all year long.

Let us find ways of carrying on Christmas as well: carrying the baby in front of us, so that we can never forget the love of God; knowing that God is behind us in all our efforts; looking for the baby Jesus in the faces of other human beings, knowing God's presence, purpose and love is not limited to a moment in history or a place in the world or in any one man, woman or child of any color. Let us be careful of those we find at our feet and keep tending to the vulnerable among us. Above all, let us let our lives be lit by stars and guided by dreams and bring our hopeful seeking eyes to every place and every person; that, as God intended, there might indeed be joy to the world far beyond Christmas day.