

WHERE THE LIGHT LEADS

A Sermon Delivered at
First Church and First Parish in Dedham
Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2007, at 8 pm
The Rev. John A. Buehrens,
Minister, First Parish in Needham

Scriptural Reading

Matthew 2

Modern Reading

To Jesus on His Birthday

Edna St. Vincent Millay

Hymn 241

In the Bleak Midwinter C. Rossetti/J.A. Storey/G. Holst

In the bleak midwinter frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter long ago.

Christ a homeless stranger, so the gospels say,
Cradled in a manger and a bed of hay;
In the bleak midwinter stable place sufficed
Mary and her baby Jesus Christ.

Once more the child and mother weave their magic spell,
Touching hearts with wonder words can never tell,
In the bleak midwinter, in this world of pain,
Where our hearts are open love is born again.

Sermon

WHERE THE LIGHT LEADS

John Buehrens

Let me begin by thanking you for being generous to a homeless family tonight. And by extending my thanks also to my colleague Rali Weaver, and to her congregation, for taking in a homeless congregation again tonight.

The story behind what brings us here tonight always provokes many memories. For me, for example, it's amusing to recall the first time I witnessed a Christmas pageant. My high school girlfriend was the eldest child of a large Irish, Roman Catholic family. Her next younger sister was playing the part of the Virgin Mary at the parochial school.

The lights went down. The curtains parted. And there, under a glaring spotlight, the opening tableau consisted of Hillary O'Toole, age 12, dressed in blue, pregnant with a pillow, seated on a donkey that clearly consisted of two rather lumpy 8th grade boys,

draped in burlap, playing the forward and nether parts of the donkey. Led by a young Joseph with a false beard, who must have had the opening line. Which he couldn't utter or recall. Stage fright. Fear not!" said someone from off stage. Joseph stayed paralyzed.

Finally, Hillary lost patience and knew she had to get things started. She looked at the audience, kicked the nether-half of the donkey, and memorably shouted, "Come on, you ass! We've got to get to Bethlehem before Christmas!" "O God!" said a nun near us. "Curtain!" Spotlight down, house lights up. Restart, with a different Joseph!

And then, when I was in Divinity School, another friend played the part of Mary. Along with eight other young adults, I shared a big old Victorian house. One was Ann Redding. She worked for BlackSide, Incorporated, the African American media company that produced the acclaimed PBS series, "Eyes on the Prize." Her father was one of the lawyers who argued against segregation in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. And she was also the soprano soloist for the First Unitarian Church of Providence, the big church on the hill by Brown University. She took bus down to sing in the choir each week.

That Christmas Eve, after the organ prelude and introit, the Providence Unitarians saw a film projected on the big white wall behind the pulpit. It showed Ann, looking expectant, along with an older, Hispanic-looking man, getting off at the bus station in the then-seedy section of downtown Providence. And going from door to door, hotel to hotel, looking for a place to stay. Being turned away. Until finally, of course, they climbed the hill up to church, and, as the short film ended, Joseph rapped with his staff on front door, and then, as the lights came up, came down the aisle with Mary for the processional hymn, with the choir dressed as shepherds, with the clergy playing the part of the magi.

Now Ann, as it happens, later went on to earn a doctorate in Biblical studies. And for twenty years now she has also been a priest in the Episcopal Church, most recently on the staff of the cathedral in Seattle, WA. But for years she has been interested in why so many African Americans have converted to Islam, and has worried that Christianity has come to function too often as what she has called "the global religion of privilege," despite its real message. And then, after 9/11, Ann began to study Islam more seriously. This year Ann startled colleagues and friends by revealing that she now considers herself both a Christian *and* a Muslim; that she's never believed in original sin, and that when

she looks at the stories of Jesus, what she now is led to is Allah, the Merciful and Compassionate. Her bishop responded by suspending her from the priesthood.

So, indirectly, I reached out to her, to remind her that our Unitarian Universalist inclusiveness may be, as I have sometimes joked with interfaith families, the one faith to have if you're having more than one! But where Ann now chooses to seek refuge for her soul will be, as for all of us, deeply personal choice.

For there can be a real cost to following where the light leads. Surely the magi from the east in Matthew's gospel – probably followers of the old, pre-Islamic religion of Persia, the Zoroastrian faith – they must have left behind much to go and follow the star. Yet at times we cannot be true to our faith and values we already hold and do otherwise.

Five years ago, as the invasion of Iraq was in preparation, at Christmas Eve I said, "It's been an ominous Advent this year. Caesar is gathering his legions again. A slaughter of innocents looms. What can one do but follow another star? Harken to more angelic voices. And keep the faith, that a New Possibility waits still in human hearts to be born."

So two days later, I went off to Baghdad, joining the head of our National Council of Churches and other American religious leaders in doing 'humanitarian inspections' while weapons inspections continued. We returned predicting far too much of what later occurred. But as I said last year, quoting Roethke, "in a dark time, the eye begins to see." Not quickly enough, perhaps. The power of denial and self-delusion can be very strong. And it can be tempting to only want to look at the brightness, and to ignore or despise the shadows within or the darkness without. But it is also almost always a mistake.

For only when it gets darkest can we truly see the light that is there to lead us on. Sometimes I think that our blessings may be as numerous as the very stars in the heavens. But unless we look up, and unless the backdrop of sky is darkened, we may not see them. Last year the greeting my wife Gwen and I sent out to friends read simply, "May your longest list at Christmas . . . be the one that counts your blessings."

But this year we have had had more than one occasion to realize that dark times sometimes simply happen: a dreadful accidental death that came in the height of summer, taking the life of the only brother of our daughter's fiancée, Anna; a more recently, a medical mistake that nearly paralyzed our older daughter, Erica, after she had given birth

to our first grandchild, Isabel. Not to mention the usual encounters with grief, and with spiritual crisis, that Gwen and I each regularly have as a pastor and a hospice chaplain.

Now I can't pretend not to have been frightened at times, almost to the point of being as paralyzed as an 8th grade Joseph. Or angry that bad things should have happened to good people I love, including some of you.

But what lights up my Christmas this year against all that is in the birth of a child. It's in a deepened gratitude for the miracle of life, for the enduring resilience of love and compassion, and for the spiritual freedom you and I too easily take for granted, to pursue life and wisdom and truth, wherever the quest may lead us. It's in a renewed commitment to help make the future, both for that child and for all earth's children, a sustainable one, with opportunities, God help us, to pass on that light from generation to generation.

I think of the beautiful and searing novel by Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction this year. In it, the worst has happened. After war, nuclear winter, under ash-laden skies, begins to freeze the planet. Nothing will grow. Here in America, a boy and his father say a poignant goodbye to their wife and mother, who is too sick and despondent to even try to survive. They follow a road headed south, armed with a pistol, pushing a shopping cart of clothes and canned goods, trying to avoid marauding bands that are hunting down the vulnerable for what they have -- even as food. There are no stars to follow, but The father tells his son that they're "carrying the fire" within, while the bad guys have given up on it.

My experience as a reader was that I found the tenderness between the boy and his father, the urgency on every page, and the power of McCarthy's prose so captivating that I couldn't put the novel down, afraid that I just had to keep on reading in order to keep them alive. But all stories end. And the end of *The Road*, they've reached the Gulf. The father is dying. He's promised to shoot his son, rather than leave him, but can't do it. He dies in the night. The boy looks up the road and sees a man coming, who stops to help him bury his dad. "I think you should come with me," the man says.

"How do I know you're one of the good guys?" asks the boy. "You don't. You'll have to take a shot." "Are you carrying the fire?" "Am I what?" "Carrying the fire." "Uh ... Yeah. We are." The man has a family. The boy walks back into the woods and kneels beside his father.

“He cried for a long time. I’ll talk to you every day, he whispered. And I won’t forget. No matter what. Then he rose and turned and walked back out to the road.”

The novel ends this way: “The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and didn’t forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time.”

“Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and hummed of mystery.”

Here is my question to you and to me this Christmas Eve: Where will the light lead you in the year ahead? If you cannot see it, may you be reminded of by a child, perhaps even the child in an ancient story, or by the tender beauty of the world we share, that you too carry the fire within.

You cannot do everything. But do what you can. Love what you already have. Then be who you’re called to be. Don’t deny the darkness without or the shadows within. But follow the light. Carry the fire within. Pass it on. Let it be re-kindled. This night, and whenever you falter. Amen.