



Richmond Hill Reflections

“Why Are there Two Stories, Parts I and II” (Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft)

December 24, 2019; Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-15; Matthew 2:1-10

“Part I”

We get the impression from Christmas cards and manger scenes that what we just heard was the first half of a two-part story. We may expect that the star in our next reading first appeared to the shepherds. We create a seamless timeline between two very different stories and overlook the differences. The version we just heard begins in Nazareth, moves on to Bethlehem, and back to Nazareth again. We will soon hear a version that begins in Bethlehem, moves on to Egypt and then to Nazareth. The inconsistency is okay because these are not histories. They’re theologies, each gospel writer telling us who he believes Jesus is. We’ve just heard Luke’s opening remarks.

The birth is brief. The details around it are vital. It opens with a power grab. All the world is to be registered. Not just the Roman Empire. The world. The emperor has plans, like any emperor. For central control. Domination. Exploitation. But G-d has a plan to disrupt the first. Jesus is born away from the crowd. He isn’t registered. Effectively undocumented. An illegal. The angels announce his birth to those like him - shepherds in the hills where their names remain unnoted.

Jesus and the shepherds are not in the centre but on the edges. It is always from the edges that movements for change are born. From the edges you know the system but aren’t submerged into the groupthink that makes critique impossible. More than offer critique, as Jesus grows up to do, from the edges you can build bridges, open gates, enlarge the circle. When you do that those in the centre lose control as the edges keep moving and disruptors are invited in to bring change.

The ultimate expansion is beyond the human. This isn’t a surprise. Born among animals, Jesus’ birth is told to those who care for them. Jesus wasn’t born to exploit the world but delight in it. Peace comes when we let go of control and cooperate instead, sharing one world, those at the edges and those in the centre, human and non-human, all creation, one whole to be cared for. Luke offers quite a theology. As we hear Matthew’s. I invite you to listen for similarities.

“Part II”

What did you notice? One thing you didn’t hear is how Jesus’ birth is again not the focus. At the end of the previous chapter, like in Luke, it’s just one line. What stands out is a journey of magi because of a star. This is a heavenly story, like angels singing to shepherds. There is also power in the centre - Herod and his court in Jerusalem. The Empire figures here too, Herod a puppet, appointed by the emperor. He wasn’t even Jewish. No wonder a new king in the line of David is born. But this king isn’t about power, about pulling everything to the centre. In this, Matthew and Luke offer one theology. This baby reaches beyond the edges to embrace the whole world.

That is why magi from the east are in this version of the one story. They are like shepherds. They are outsiders. First, they are outside of the Roman Empire. It is hard to get further from the centre of power than Bethlehem, a know-nothing village in Judea, a distant province with little status. But the magi are from even further east of Rome, beyond the borderlands from another empire altogether. This is Matthew’s way of having Jesus reach beyond the edge of the circle. And in so doing he heals a rift, because the magi are non-Jews, coming to pay honour to a Jewish baby.

This too is disruptive. Those who hunger for power like there to be some who are in and others who are out. But as G-d is revealed in this powerless and vulnerable child, there is no longer a border. Everyone, everything is part of the same circle, joined as we soon will be at one table. As we continue to pray together, may the full import of what Luke and Matthew are telling us sink in. And may it change us. Like the magi, may we return home by a different road.