

## "HOME BY A DIFFERENT WAY"

TEXT: "And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way".

(Matthew 2: 12)

### INTRODUCTION

It was the day after Christmas....and a child playing with his new toys was heard to say, "Gee...now we have to wait a whole year for another Christmas!"

Perhaps you have the same feeling. Within a few days the great pageant will draw to a close. Soon we'll be taking down the tree that we only just put up. We'll put the tree holder away in some special place and next December we won't be able to remember where we put it. The lights and the ornaments will be packed away. We'll make arrangements to exchange the gifts that don't fit. Some will be tempted to say, "thank God it's all over...it's so exhausting... the holidays depress me". Others will feel like saying, "Oh...if only the spirit of Christmas could continue for a few more weeks....I love it...the warth, the cheer, the color...what a different it makes!"

I've always been fond of those lines that Carlyle wrote to a friend:

"I do not like to take down the Christmas tree. Not because it is a drudgery to wrap the ornaments or sweep the needles that blur into the carpet pattern. I can do all that needs doing in the course of all the other things a house requires. But the spot where the tree has stood seems empty as though it wanted something it had had and lost. No chair can fill the place where the tree was. No end table. No magazine rack. Trees are living things, and when adopted into the family at Christmas embrace so much more than colored lights and shining balls and tantalizing wrap of present. Maybe what I mean to say is: CHRISTMAS WAS NOT MADE TO BE PUT AWAY!"

"Christmas was not made to be put away". A lovely line. And how sad it is if we must now wait for a whole year for another Christmas...for Christmas stirs our hearts and our city as no other religious observance does. What is it about Christmas that touches us so deeply?

### WONDER

Christmas, in a way, has a special magic all of its own. Year after year, it invades our lives, overpowering us against our wills. It overcomes the crowds, lifts us above and beyond the "jingle bells" of cash registers. It touches something deep and sacred within us.

Christmas is the wonder, the surprise, the pure joy of childhood. It's the child-Jesus brought to mind each year in the pageantry of the poetry of the star, the stable, the shepherds, the wise men as they gather around Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus. We kneel in humility before that lovely scene.

At Christmas for a few brief moments we all become like children - recalling again for a little while the joy and excitement with loved ones. It's recalling the laughter and warmth and the memories symbolized by decorations,

retrieving, for instance, that old bent star to be placed on the top of the tree.

BEAUTY Then again, Christmas is beauty - the beauty of bright and shining reds and greens, silver and gold, the the lovely cards and trees and candles and wreaths. It's the beauty of voices singing the familiar carols, the beauty of a church choir carrying us across the centuries as we're lifted by melodies out of all low thoughts and taken up to the higher ground of hope and faith and love.

It's hearing or singing Handel's Messiah. It's going to Riverside Church and sharing in a Service of Carols and Candles. It's coming here and sharing in all we do: seeing the children light the Advent candles, hearing them read the Scriptures, worshipping the Christ Child in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary. How blessed we are. Hearing the choir sing "Masters In This Hall" and thrilling to the descants of the carols.

GIVING Christmas is wonder. Christmas is beauty. Christmas is also giving - thinking of others, plotting to surprise loved ones and friends. It's remembering someone else who has no one to think about him - the unexpected visit, the card, the letter, the special remembrance.

At Christmas - for a few days - we lose our old selves and we discover that there is real joy to be found in helping others to a little happiness. One card I received this Christmas put it so well. This is the card. It's from Florence Comiskey, a school teacher, now retired, living upstate. I sat in her class room back in 7th grade and we still exchange greetings. Let me read it to you.

REMEMBERING Her card reminds me, too, that Christmas is also a memory time. It's a time when we recall the best out of years past. Joyful memories flood our minds as the past is transformed by time into a soft, radiant glow - like the shining of a church full of flickering candles on Christmas Eve.

Friendships from the past are renewed once again as cards and letters and greetings come from friends now living in distant places.

Yes, Christmas is a time when we pause and recall how many blessings we have had, and we are aware that at no time in all of our lives have we ever been completely alone. We may have tuned ourselves out, but God - through the Christ spirit - has always been there. Christmas is a memory time.

LOVING And Christmas is a time of loving. It's a time for stopping to listen to others - not to just what they say, but to what they want to say, but don't know how to say...listening to their feelings. It is caring enough to say thoughtful words.

It is loving enough to be there, and to say nothing. It is sensitivity and empathy. Concern, openness, acceptance.

ALL THIS AND MORE Christmas is all this and so much more. And how sad it will be if we must wait for a whole year to experience the wonder and warmth of this incredible time - the beauty, the giving, the remembering, the loving, the caring.

HOME BY A DIFFERENT WAY

The last verse of today's Scripture Lesson gently reminds us that we need not wait a whole year. The Wise Men followed a star. They had made their way to the manger and had left their gifts, then in a dream, they sensed that they were not to go back to Herod in Jerusalem, but to return home a different way.

They gave their gifts and received as well. It signifies that their lives took on a new and better perspective. And I think our lives can be spared that "childish post-Christmas let down" when we mature enough to realize that the Christmas gifts we really need are gifts of the spirit. Something unique and earth-shaking happened to the Wise Men. For them, "the word had become flesh and dwelt among them". They had been exposed to Eternal Truth at Bethlehem.

And before we move away from the warm glow of these days, before we leave, perhaps we too can change and go home by a different way. For it was the Christ Child who grew into manhood and went on to leave with us the faith and hope that has changed the lives of people and the life of our world.

LOOKING AHEAD

Too many

G. K. Chesterton once said of H. G. Wells that whenever he met Wells he seemed to be returning from somewhere, never going anywhere. Christians have a sad way of communicating the feeling that they are simply returning from something. Yes, we're returning but let us communicate to others that we're going someplace this coming year. The New Year is calling us to look ahead.

Let me share with you some of His thoughts and His words that each of us in our own way may begin to plot a new direction and to "go home by a different way" because of His life and His coming.

Listen again, as if you were hearing these words for the very first time, words that have touched the hearts of millions across 20 centuries.

"Blessed are those of you who mourn, for you shall experience a comforting Presence.

Happy are you when men insult you and mistreat you and tell you all kinds of evil lives against you because you are my followers. Be glad and leap for joy for your Heavenly Father will reward you greatly.

Love your enemies. Do a kindness for those who hate you. Say a prayer for those who abuse you.

Do not pass judgement on another, and then they will not pass judgement on you - for the measure you use in dealing with others will be the measure that will be used toward you.

Why do you look at the speck in your brothers' eye, and do not notice the beam in your own eye?

How often am I to forgive my brother? Seventy-times seven!"

Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened unto you.

Do not worry about your life...fretting as to what kind of food you are going to eat, or about your body as to what clothes you will wear. Your life is more important than what you wear.

Will worry help you to add a single hour to your life.

The one who tries to preserve his own self will lose his soul, but he who loses himself in the cause of the Gospel will find the higher life.

Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever desires to have a chief place among you must minister to everyone.

What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul.

If anyone forces you to go one mile with him, go two miles.

Whatever you would like to have others do for you, do it for them.

What commandment is chief of all? And Jesus said, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all the heart, with all thy mind, with all thy strength, and thy neighbor as thy self.

If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, and you would say to this mountain, 'Move away from here' - it will move and nothing will be impossible for you!

Come unto me all you who toil and bear heavy burdens and I will give you rest, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt itself loses its flavor, wherewith can its strength be restored. It is good for nothing, but to be thrown away.

You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine that men may see your good works."

HOME BY A DIFFERENT WAY Not only did the Wise Men go home by a different road, but they went home different persons - for they had had an encounter with a new life, a new power, a new force - the power of Divine Love. It had come their way and touched their lives. It was a love that nothing - not even death - can separate us from.

"Are you willing" Henry Van Dyke" once asked, "to believe that love is the strongest force in the world - stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death, and that the Blessed Life which began in Bethlehem 1900 hundred years ago is the image and the brightness of Eternal Love? Then you can keep Christmas. And if you can keep it for a day, then why not always?"

Beloved in Christ -

Christmas was not made to be "put away". It was made to be kept all year long.  
~~May we, too, go home a different way because like the Wise Men of old, we too have~~  
~~knelt in humility at the manger...and brushed up against Eternal Truth. A~~  
different way. Different persons. So may it be for us all.

home

because we've been to Bethlehem...

PRAYER AS the Christmas Season slowly passes once again, O God, may the  
light of it linger on in our lives. May we see the world and those in  
it a new way and from a different perspective. Remind us that Christmas it not  
to be packaged up, stored in boxes like ornaments, but it is to be lived - now  
and every day in the coming year...lived out in faith and hope, trust and peace,  
joy and good will to all. In the spirit of Christ Child we pray. Amen

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