

Christmas 2

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*Psalm 84, Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 1:3-14, Matthew 2:1-12*

There's a tradition regarding Nativities that I remember from my childhood. The Wise Men figures would move around during the month of December, getting closer to the manger in the Nativity on Epiphany. Did anybody else grow up with that kind of tradition, where the Wise Men moved through the house?

I was in a "live nativity" when I was in graduate school because I'd lost my job, and that was the only job I could get. I was big and had a beard, so that worked. We had a little path we followed and ended up at the manger. I like nativities. I think a lot of people do. The nativity is a great visual item to help us think about some of our readings today. Most of our nativities include the wise men, shepherds, animals, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus and sometimes angels.

Some Italian nativities include an entire village. The whole town is astir with all kinds of activity. In fact, sometimes, you can't even see where the baby Jesus actually is. You have to look. We can see the same pattern in art from the middle ages. Pieter Bruegel and in some of the other artists in the Middle Ages, put the nativity in the middle of a busy city, and you don't exactly know right off where the baby Jesus even is. You have to look.

Then if we think about the way we celebrate Christmas here in America, we might have other characters of the nativity. We might have Frosty or Rudolph. The idea of inserting Rudolph with Frosty or Santa is not

actually unusual because it's very consistent with the medieval tradition. This is one of the medieval pictures I like, and I'll see if I can say his name. I looked it up, Domenico Ghirlandaio. He painted this picture in 1488. This painting was for a children's hospital. He painted people that were present. Some of the people in the painting are famous people from the era. He paints an adult John the Baptist. You can see him in the lower left-hand corner. But John the Baptist was a baby when Jesus was a baby. Ghirlandaio paints him as an adult prophet to the Baby, pointing to Jesus, because that's his role.

Then you see these two little infants in the bottom of the page, and that's kind of a nod to the Slaughter of the Innocents, the story where Herod kills the babies. So these are babies that have come to worship Jesus. It is telling us a theological point, that these babies are some of the first saints. It's also a reminder because it's at a children's hospital. So Jesus has come to heal and redeem the infants.

There's an ox and a donkey, which I have talked about in the past. It's the two most common motifs of ancient Christian art on the nativity. The very first nativity that shows up does not have humans in it, with exception to the baby Jesus, but it does have the ox and the donkey. That's a sign of the Jews and the Gentiles. They've come together. And so this has all sorts of images. There's also John the Evangelist. So you have John the Baptist, John the Evangelist. Then you have a lot of local people probably from that era, and there's all sorts of stories going on in the background of the nativity.

The nativity provided a way for the church imagine the birth of Christ for centuries. Nativities have often included multiple people, not just the

Wise, bowing before the child. If we think about this image in relation to our readings today, we have four readings and four different journeys, and we'll consider these four journeys and how they are all moving toward the nativity.

Our first reading I'll think about is Psalm 84. Psalm 84 is an odd Psalm because it seems almost out of place. It's a Psalm of pilgrimage, and it fits more consistently with Psalm 120 through Psalm 134, which are what we call the Song of Ascents. They're all pilgrimage Psalms. They're all Psalms used for the traveling to Jerusalem to worship the Lord. Well, that's what Psalm 84 is, but it's not part of the Song of Ascents. It's separate. And so you have a Psalm where the psalmist is crying out for the presence of the Lord. And just briefly, I'll look at it... It's a prayer to be in the presence of the Lord, a prayer of longing. So let me find the Book of Psalms.

Here we go. The psalmist opens, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of Hosts. My soul longs, yes it faints, For the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God." And so the psalmist is thinking about the journey, moving toward the journey, and it's a difficult journey, as you read some elements in here. He talks about, "Blessed are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion." This is those who are going to take the journey to Jerusalem. Some are going to face danger, some are going to face hardship, which makes us wonder, is he talking about a yearly pilgrimage, or is he talking about those who are coming home from Babylon? We don't know, because those who are coming home will face a tremendously dangerous journey.

He says, "As they pass through the Valley of Baca," a place of mourning, "they make it a place of springs. The early rain also covers it with pools." So there's that image of those facing difficulties to try to get to the tabernacle or the temple to worship, and they're transforming their hardships into places of joy. So we can read Psalm 84 in this spiritual way. Even if he's talking about physical journey, they travel from strength to strength, and so it could be the Pilgrim himself is getting stronger, but it also has the image of a company growing. So they travel from company to company. Some translations say from company to company. They're getting larger. More and more people are joining. Then it says, "Each one will appear before God and Zion." So this whole Psalm is a journey to Jerusalem, to the temple, to the place of God's dwell, okay? This first Psalm is an image of the people of God, the ancient Israelites returning to worship the Lord at the temple.

Now the next reading, Jeremiah is, in one sense, the most unusual and the one that we're probably least familiar with, because Jeremiah, it's not obvious if you just read it, but he is doing something very odd here. Okay. Jeremiah 31. If you know the Book of Jeremiah, this is one of the bleakest books in the Bible. So much of it is about judgment and pain. It's about the end of Jerusalem, Jerusalem being destroyed. So much of what Jeremiah talks about is destruction for the sin of God's people, for God's people turning against Him. Then every so often, Jeremiah gives us a word of hope, a word of encouragement.

So in Jeremiah 31, we hear the voice of the Lord speaking encouragement. This is a pilgrimage, but it's a different kind of pilgrimage, because this is not the people embarking on a sort of a

regular pilgrimage, a yearly pilgrimage. This is the Lord gathering His people, so He's actually the one acting in this. He's gathering His people who are in exile.

What is unusual is he says, "Thus says the Lord, the people who survived the sword," the people who have survived this judgment of going to Babylon or being killed in the wilderness, they "found grace in the wilderness. When Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. 'I have loved you with an everlasting love. Therefore, I have continued my faithfulness to you. I will build you, and you will be built, O virgin Israel. You shall adorn yourself with tambourines and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. You shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria, the planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit, and there shall be a day when the watchmen will call the hill country of Ephraim, 'Arise and go up to Zion, to the house of the Lord.'"

That's leading up to today's reading. As we read today's reading, we find the Lord is addressing two different groups of people. They're not the same group. He's addressing the Ephraimites and the Judahites: these are two different groups of Jews who go to civil war. They split into two kingdoms: the Southern kingdom and the Northern kingdom.

The Southern Kingdom is the kingdom of the House of David. All the Great Kings of Judah, okay? But in the Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam sets up a competitive worship system, okay? So this is the Ephraimites. So they have turned away from the Lord. They've become idolaters. There are still faithful Jews in the Northern Kingdom. In fact, this is where we meet Elijah and Elisha. So there's plenty of those who follow the way of the Lord. But the nation as a whole is turned over to Babylon.

So now you have two nations that once were one kingdom of David split. The Northern Kingdom falls about a hundred years before the Southern Kingdom, and when it falls, there's the sense that it's completely destroyed. If you hear the term, the Lost Tribes of Israel, that's the Northern Kingdom. So this is the people groups who have been dispersed into the empire. The Assyrians have taken them, and they seem to be forgotten in history. Then, a hundred years later, the Judahites, or Jerusalem falls to Babylon, which is the story we're most familiar with, the exile to Babylon.

Now the North and South are both exiled. Jeremiah, on behalf of the Lord, addresses both groups, saying, "I'm gathering both kingdoms. They're both coming back to Jerusalem to worship. I'm restoring them both." That's sort of the power and the beauty of this passage. It's a group of pilgrims that are being restored. It's all about restoration. It's restoration of the people of God who's been dispersed, especially the Ten Lost Tribes who, supposedly, would never be restored. But God promises restoration. They're coming back to worship in Jerusalem.

Now, we go our third reading, and I'm going to reverse the order. I'm going to go to the gospel reading. So now we have the story of the Magi, which is our nativity story. Most properly, we call them Magi or Wise Men. Some people call them Kings. There's no indication they're really Kings. They're most likely astrologers, okay? They studied the heavens. The amazing story is, this is not people who are seeking to do palm reading or some kind of fortune telling. This is sort of a wisdom in their culture, but they're seeking truth in the heavens, and because they're

seeking truth, God leads them to truth. He leads them to the Baby, to the story of Jesus.

These are pagans who are coming on the basis of their own pagan ways of knowing truth. They are seeking truth, and God leads them to truth. So in one sense, the story of the Magi is a story of pilgrims coming to the manger and having to let go of their own truths, their partial truths. If you've ever read T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, he captures this image of these men who have to abandon their partial truths. They return to kingdoms that they know are false. And so it's a powerful image of coming to the nativity to let go. It's the image of Santa kneeling at the manger saying, "I'm not the truth." It is actually bringing all our partial truths before Christ, recognizing Him as the fullness of the truth.

And then we have one last pilgrimage, which is very different than all the other pilgrimages. It's the saints in Ephesus. You almost have to think of Ephesians as a whole, but the whole Book of Ephesians has a motion of moving upward, because it's about raising up the people into a temple, becoming living stones. The reason it's so significant in relation to these others is it's about the people of God becoming the tabernacle of God. We are becoming the temple, as a community. We're becoming the dwelling place. And in one way of reading the Bible is the whole Bible is moving toward the tabernacle. It's moving toward the dwelling place of God on earth, which is what we see in the end of Revelation. It's the dwelling place of God on earth. It is the people of God in perfect communion with God.

We see hints of it in our nativity stories. When the shepherds see the angels, it's the only place in the Bible where a host of angels comes on

earth. There are occasional appearances, but in one spot, the angels actually break into earth, heaven actually appears on earth. That's pretty significant, because this is God beginning to heal the communion between heaven and earth, which is what all these pilgrimages are leading to, is the people of God being gathered by Christ.

And what's interesting, worth meditating on, and I'll just mention it, is that what God's doing is gathering people that don't think, that they may think they shouldn't be drawn to Him. But when they see the other people, when the Judahites see their ancient enemies, the Northern Kingdom, the Ephraimites coming, how could that be? He's gathering people that are at odds with each other, that have fault. He's gathering Jews and Gentiles, people that can't really be gathered, but He's doing it in Christ. So Christ is healing the nations. He's healing those who are natural enemies. He's bringing us all the peace. Come to the Prince of Peace, worship Him, and be changed by Him so that we can love our enemies and those who don't think have a right to come to the manager, to come to worship the Lord.

As we meditate on this text, I would pray He would provoke us to pray for those who we don't think deserve to come to the table of the Lord, that we would pray that He would draw them and there would be a union and a healing between the peoples of the earth in Christ. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.