

Christmas Eve – The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 12.24.23

Christmas I: Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2: 1-14 (15-20)

Did you have to travel to get here to St. A.'s for Christmas Eve? Did anyone travel first by plane to SeaTac or Paine Field? Any train riders? Intrepid ferry-riders? How about those who only had to get in a car to go from one part of the island to here? There is lots of coming and going this year. Some who are usually here have travelled elsewhere. Some of you who are usually elsewhere are here. Welcome, all! The weather has been mild here this year, but you might remember last year, a few days before Christmas, snow and ice impacted a lot of people's plans. Travel is fraught these days. Whether or not you travelled in the last few days, you perhaps have at least one or two memorable travel stories that remain fresh in your mind, regardless of when they happened.

The Christmas story is a travel story. In fact, it's a collection of travel stories: Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth, up north, to Bethlehem, down south—the I-5 of the first century, by decree of the Emperor. The birth of the holy child begins with the mystery of bureaucracy, unexpected travel plans, long lines and paperwork. Everyone's traveling and it's a mess. The angel and Heavenly Host travel to the shepherds to announce the good news of Jesus's birth, setting in motion the shepherds' decision to travel, post-haste, to see what's happened, first-hand. They end up doing a quick round-trip. That's basically where the story ends tonight, but it is to-be-continued, because the magi are basically packing their bags, getting ready to set forth on their journey, as well.

For all the times we've heard this story, it can be easy to forget the central travel story here: where God travels, yet again, to be with God's people. To become, yet again, Emmanuel. Christina Rossetti's poem tells God's travel story this way: *Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love Divine, Love was born at Christmas*. Every hymn we sing tonight is a telling of this travel story. I would like to add another travel story to the mix of tonight's collection of travel stories. It isn't from the gospel. It happened more recently. It isn't mine. It comes from Naomi Shihab Nye, an Arab-American poet. The title of her travel story is *Gate A-4*. It takes place in an airport in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal...I heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately." Well - one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there. An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly. "Help," said the flight service person. "Talk to her...We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this."

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke to her haltingly [in Arabic]...The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment...I said, "No we're fine, you'll get there, just later, who is picking you up? Let's call him." We called her son and I spoke with him in English. I told him I would

stay with his mother...She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found...they had ten shared friends. Then I thought...why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up about two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade [traditional] *mamool* cookies— little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts—out of her bag—and was offering them to [people] at the gate. To my amazement, not a single [person] declined one. [*The author says she offered them to the women.*] It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo—we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie. And then the airline broke out free beverages...and two little girls from our flight ran around serving us all apple juice and they were covered with powdered sugar, too. *And I noticed my new best friend—by now we were holding hands—had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.*

Naomi Shahib Nye ends her story this way: And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies...This can still happen anywhere. *Not everything is lost.* (*Gate A-4* in *Honeybee: Poems and Short Prose*, p. 162-164. I first read this in the Center for Action and Contemplation Daily Meditation, December 13, 2023)

This travel story isn't my story, but as I've been thinking about it, Mary and Joseph's story is not exactly ours, either. I mean it is, but it isn't. It's told by Luke and even Luke's beloved version doesn't capture it all. The bigger story, the one that begins, "In the beginning was the Word..." is nothing more, nothing less than God's ongoing travelogue (God's growing collection of travel stories throughout time) to be with all of creation, all people, including tonight, with us. There is so much pain in so many lives, so many pressure points in the world, including Bethlehem, right now. Tonight's travel stories—from Luke, from Christina Rossetti, Naomi Shihab Nye, from your own experiences, from every corner of the world—tell of the Christ child, Love in this world, being birthed. And how the world is still waiting, yearning, in need of Love being birthed. When I / you / we start thinking about how hard it is to birth Love in this world—seemingly impossible, even—it might be time to think of how powdered sugar travels. Going everywhere, including and especially those places where you don't expect it. *This can still happen anywhere.* This is happening tonight.