

Christmas 1 December 27 2015 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton
John 1:1-18

I thought our Christmas Eve and Day services were wonderful this year! I think that every year - they're special. What I also think every year is this: how remarkable it is that for this one moment, we draw upwards of 80% of attendance from folk who don't come regularly. On Thursday evening, one couple said, "yes, we came four years ago." Another family, "We came last year and liked it so much we came back again this year."

The fact of infrequent attendance is a wonderment to me – I (and, I suspect, you) would celebrate if those folk came more often. And I also wonder what it is that draws them at all, if the rest of the year holds so little attraction for them.

In a recent Gallup Poll (2012) 78% of Americans say that they identify themselves with Christianity. When you ask how many of that 78% actually go to church, even infrequently, Gallup will tell you that the answer is 39% – half those who identify with our faith. And if you add the word "regularly" that 39% number falls again.

Why is that? Is it that these folk are drawn in some way to faith, but not institutional religion? Are they challenged by the word "belief" – that they have to believe certain things to be a part of the community? Could it be, perhaps, that they wished they believed something – anything, but struggle deeply with the way faith gets expressed in church?

The answer is probably "yes" to all of these questions - though different people will find one more compelling as an explanation than the others.

So what is faith, and what isn't it. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has opined that ***"Faith is not about what public opinion decides, and it is not about how we happen to be feeling about ourselves. It is the response people make to what presents itself as a reality - a reality which makes claims on you."***

Faith, in other words, comes as the result of a challenging encounter, an encounter with something quite extraordinary that interrupts the ordinary and the everyday, something brings you up short, demands that you turn aside from your path to see what the heck is going on! Faith begins in the moment you stop, the moment when you can't just walk on as you did before.

Another part of the challenge of the moment of encounter is that its claims involve change and even loss. This is because when our ideas, our habits, our hopes change we leave something behind, we have to let go of some cherished idea, belief, or practice in order to be open and welcoming to the fruits of our encounter with the Holy.

If you've ever read T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi," you'll hear just such a reflection about loss. Remember how it begins?

"A cold coming we had of it, Just the worst time of the year For a journey, and such a long

journey: The ways deep and the weather sharp, The very dead of winter.”

Here’s how it ends:

“I had seen birth and death, But had thought they were different; this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods.”

Eliot wonders, through the mouths of the Wise Men, now back home, but “no longer at ease here in the old dispensation,” realizing that the birth they had witnessed was actually a death for the old ways they lived, the “old dispensation.”

That death came as a result of what they’d seen; in a very real sense it was the challenge that for them offered life, offered faith, but – because it was a shock, a claim, a challenge – necessarily involved death. *The wise men found what they were looking for - but it was not at all what they thought they had been looking for.*

Our Christian “Good News” firmly declares two equally necessary truths:

1. **Jesus is the hope of the nations**, Jesus is what the entire human race really longs to see, the person whose presence heals all wounds and griefs; and
2. **Jesus is an utter surprise**, so foreign that he is unrecognizable to those who might have been expected to welcome him. He made the world, says St. John, in today’s Gospel passage from St. John, and he spoke in its history; but the world had no room for him and the experts in revelation and religious purity turned from him in disgust (John 1:10-11).

The opening of John’s gospel holds these two things in tension, that the truth of God is the most comforting and joyful presence we can imagine; and the truth of God is the most disorienting and demanding thing we will ever encounter.

That fact that we struggle to respond to Jesus’ invitation, built on the Baptist’s – to turn around and look where we’ve never looked before, to trust the One who is calling and drop under the cleansing water of God’s overflowing compassion, to join the new human race, re-created in the Spirit of mutual love and delight and service – the fact that we struggle to respond is simply a sign of how far we’ve wandered from real humanity, real honesty about our weaknesses and limits. With the Wise Men, we find it “hard and bitter agony” to turn away and be still and look at the mystery of love that is at the heart of this event and this season.

In all the Gospels, Jesus refuses to answer the questions people think are important – no neat answers, no system of ritual or moral behavior, no suggestion that religion can be an “add-on” to regular, everyday behaviors that make up “ordinary” life. Instead, we find mystery and challenge – this is no easy path, no sure-fire “do this and that will happen” plan.

So I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised if Christianity doesn’t attract in the ways we hope it will, if folk come once a year and that’s it! If people hesitate to call themselves Christian, perhaps this

is a sort of backhanded recognition that there's a strangeness and a toughness to what Christian faith claims that should not be taken lightly.

What about us? We who *are* here regularly? I believe we're here because we've recognized that somehow this is where we should be, where it is natural to be - in the company of this man, Jesus, listening to his words, turning aside to see deeply into the mysterious events of his life and death and resurrection.

Our faith, at its heart, is an invitation to see ourselves honestly and see the world differently. Faith begins beyond the answers of a system, or the disciplines of a ritual, or the requirements of a moral code. Of course, all of these have their place; and those who spend time in the company of Jesus will find themselves working out all these things in the light of the scriptural witness to the new life. ***But it all starts with that turning aside to see.*** That's what the shepherds did. That's what the Wise Men did.

In the end, if we can let go of our conviction that our questions, our priorities and worries, achievements and failures are the most important things in the universe; if we find the freedom to stop and turn aside, then the world itself begins to turn into renewal.

May it be so for us in this coming year. Amen.

