

## **The Journey is Home**

*Sermon Preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

*January 4, 2009*

*Ephesians 2:19-22, Matthew 2:1-12*

Our first scripture passage comes from Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus. The particular portion of the epistle we are reading from today is focused on unity. Note how he writes to a congregation made up largely of Gentile Christians and tells them that they were at one point strangers to God's covenant, but now have been included in it. When Paul speaks of the dividing wall of hostility being torn down, you should know that he is evoking an image of the Jerusalem Temple, which had an area where only faithful Jews were allowed to go, an area that was walled off from the courtyard of the Gentiles. But Paul affirms that in Christ, the people who were once separate have been made one. As the passage ends, pay attention to how Paul uses an image from the world of architecture: "You are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." And think about how this unity between Jew and Gentile would have been considered anathema to some of Paul's hearers. *Read Ephesians here.*

Our second lesson, from the book of Matthew, is the familiar Epiphany passage of the wise men coming to Jesus. The visit of the wise men, educated Eastern elite is meant to represent how the wider world not just the Jewish community into which Jesus is born, comes to recognize Jesus' messiahship. As you hear the passage read, pay attention to the reaction of the various characters in the story to the news heralded by the star. And observe what the wise men do after their visit to the place where Jesus was. *Read Matthew here.*

***Happy New Year!*** Before we move forward, I want to look back. At our Session Retreat this past June, our theme was, "A Dwelling Place for God." Working with our text from Ephesians, I encouraged our elders to think about what it means that we at Immanuel - which, after all means "God with us" - are (and are meant to be) a home for God. In our opening worship time, I led the elders through a guided meditation. "Imagine that you, yourself are a house - a house for God." "What sort of house would you be? Where would that house be located? On the beach, in the mountains, near a stream, out in the desert, by a crowded city street with a lot of traffic? What would the house look like on the outside? With what building materials would it be constructed? How many doors would it have, and what would the doors look like? What about windows? Would there be a lot of them? Just a few? Think about each room of the house. What rooms would be the largest? Which ones would get the most activity? What types of things would happen there? What sort of house for God would you be?"

It was interesting to hear people's reflections on the sort of house they would be. To the best of my recollection, no one said an R.V. But as I think about it, a mobile home, not a stationary one in a trailer park, but an actual moving house might be the best way to think about what it means that we are as individuals and as a community of faith, a dwelling place for God. Because what it means to be a home for God is to be on a journey of spiritual growth and development - a journey that takes us places we might never have imagined going.

I should tell you that the title of this sermon is borrowed from the title of a book of essays by Nelle Katherine Morton.<sup>1</sup> Nelle Morton was born in the mountains of East Tennessee in 1905, grew up in the old Southern Presbyterian Church, went to the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, and then went on to become a lifelong advocate for marginalized people of different colors, classes, and creeds. As a Southern churchwoman in the 30's and 40's, she challenged segregation laws and organized interracial youth camps. When health issues forced her to return to her family's farm for the first part of the fifties, she devoted time to working with physically handicapped and mentally challenged young people. She continually found herself on the side of those who were left out and left behind in society, and as the sixties progressed into the seventies and eighties, she became one of the great heroes of the Christian feminist movement. If the word feminist sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard to you, think of what moved Morton to that position - the sense that women were being treated as second class citizens, people whose concerns were not being heard.

A biographical sketch of her by Elizabeth Caldwell says of Morton, "When examining the body of her work, one consistent theme becomes apparent, the education and empowerment of the outsider, those who are considered different by the dominant powers in the culture. Though Nelle's name is certainly more widely known as feminist theologian, her leadership and experiences as social activist, public school educator and religious educator provided the threads essential in weaving together the tapestry of her life and work."<sup>2</sup>

Of putting together the book of essays, "The Journey is Home" which was essentially her memoir, Morton wrote that she was challenged to see her life, "not as a journey with much unfinished business, but as a journey in which the traveling itself is home." Whether or not she realized it, she was echoing the words of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, who penned, "*The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.*"<sup>3</sup>

What I have come to understand is that the journey with the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ is a journey in which the traveling itself is a kind of home. We meet God not just on but in the journey. The God we meet is the same God who called seventy-five year old Abraham to leave his home and his kindred and go to a land that he would be shown. This is the same God who spoke to Moses from a burning bush and when asked his name said, "*I am that I am,*" which can also be translated, "I will go where I will go or I will do what I will do or I will become what I will become, or I'm going to be and do what I darn well please." This is the same God who traveled with the Israelites in the Exodus, sojourned with them in tents, and questioned why David would want to build God a house. When the people of Israel went into the exile, this is the God whom Ezekiel envisioned as a great big wheel within a wheel - a God on the move so to speak - a God whose presence was not confined to the temple in Jerusalem. This is the God who came in Jesus Christ to tear down the dividing wall of hostility, as Paul called it, to make room for the Gentile, the outsider, the one who is not included.

This is the God who spoke in a dream to the wise men and sent them home by another way. Not the way they came, not the way they expected to go, but another way. To put it in other words, they didn't go back the way they would have been expected to, according to convention, but they intentionally went back another way.

Some time ago I heard the contemporary sociologist of religion Diana Butler Bass lecture at Wesley Seminary. During her lecture, she talked about the work she did for her book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*. She talked about how she came to measure churches on different lines, or planes. She went into her project thinking that churches only varied as to whether they were conservative or liberal theologically and socially, but she came to understand that there was another axis, or line, on which churches differed. She called it the line of conventionality vs. intentionality. She found that some churches were more tied to being conventional (unquestioningly doing things the way they had always been done - the way communion was served, the sort of music that was used in the service, and so forth) and some churches were more intentional (whatever they chose to do, they consciously thought about what they were doing and why, and their answers went beyond more than just we've always done it that way). I thought that was a helpful way to look at differences between churches. And I think, when we are at our best, Immanuel, we are intentional rather than conventional.

Conventionality versus intentionality is also a helpful way to look at the way we approach life as individuals. Do we do things just because we've always done them that way, or do we do things because we make a conscious decision? It's a good thing to think about as we enter a new year.

Every time I read the story of the wise men going home by another way, I think of James Taylor's song by the same name. From the moment I first heard the song, I loved it. But learning that Taylor wrote it in the midst of recovery from heroin and alcohol addiction made it one of my favorite songs of all time. If there's any experience that entails a move from conventional to intentional, it is recovering from addiction. Hear the poetry of his song in light of the context in which it was written.

*Those magic men the Magi  
Some people call them wise  
Or Oriental, even kings  
Well anyway, those guys  
They visited with Jesus  
They sure enjoyed their stay  
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme  
They went home by another way*

*Yes they went home by another way  
Home by another way  
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too  
And go home by another way  
We can make it another way  
Safe home as they used to say  
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high  
And go home another way*

*Steer clear of royal welcomes  
Avoid a big to-do  
A king who would slaughter the innocents  
Will not cut a deal for you  
He really, really wants those presents*

*He'll comb your camel's fur  
Until his boys announce they've found trace amounts  
Of your frankincense, gold and myrth*

*Time to go home by another way  
Home by another way  
You have to figure the Gods saying play the odds  
And go home by another way  
We can make it another way  
Safe home as they used to say  
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high  
And go home another way*

*Home is where they want you now  
You can more or less assume that you'll be welcome in the end  
Mustn't let King Herod haunt you so  
Or fantasize his features when you're looking at a friend*

*Well it pleasures me to be here  
And to sing this song tonight  
They tell me that life is a miracle  
And I figured that they're right  
But Herod's always out there  
He's got our card on file  
It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch  
Old Herod likes to take a mile*

*It's best to go home by another way  
Home by another way  
We got this far to a lucky star  
But tomorrow is another day  
We can make it another way  
Safe home as they used to say  
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high  
And go home another way<sup>4</sup>*

Basho: The Journey is Home.  
Taylor: Go Home by Another Way.

The journey of faith is one in which we intentionally create space for God in our lives. And this communion meal we are about to share, a meal which testifies to the power of vulnerable love, is bread for that journey.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> Nelle Katherine Morton, *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985)

<sup>2</sup> The webpage featuring this biographical sketch can be found at the Talbot School of Theology website.  
[http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/view.cfm?n=nelle\\_morton](http://www.talbot.edu/ce20/educators/view.cfm?n=nelle_morton)

<sup>3</sup> Matsuo Basho's work is worth exploring. There are a variety of translations for this verse. I am using Sam Hamill's translation from his book *Narrow Road to the Interior and Other Writings*, a.k.a. *The Essential Bashô*, 1998. You can find other translations at <http://www.bopsecrets.org/gateway/passages/basho-oku.htm>

<sup>4</sup> James Taylor and Timothy Mayer, "Home By Another Way" *Never Die Young*, 1998.