

“Out of Bethlehem”
Hosea 11:1-4 Matthew 2:7-15
December 30, 2007

I have never been to Bethlehem, and will probably never see it, but in my mind's eye I can see Bethlehem, the city of Jesus' birth.

I know it is really the city of King David and the place where he was anointed, but in my mind it is Jesus' City.

I know that it is about five miles south of Jerusalem, and is sacred to both Jews and Christians.

I also know that outside of Matthew and Luke and outside of the birth narratives it is never mentioned again anywhere in the NT.

Perhaps only preachers and professors of preachers are interested in the impossibility of harmonizing the accounts of Bethlehem according to Matthew and Luke.

Matthew is filled with drama and trickery, wise men working for King Herod and a night flight into Egypt.

Luke never mentions Wise Men or Egypt, but tells of pastoral and peaceful Shepherds seeking and finding the Christ Child.

Both, however, agree on Bethlehem as the city of Jesus' Birth, and a place he must leave.

While, most of us no longer live in the city of our birth, few, if any of us, were forced to leave the place of our birth.

It is difficult to place ourselves into this story, either Matthew's or Luke's.

Home, and place, is a precious thing.

This is the last Christmas my father will be at home. My mother, with the support of the children, has made the decision to move Dad into a nursing home after the holidays.

A few years ago a local newspaper did an article about my father, in which he said he had never lived out of sight of his birthplace. The home in which he was born was built in 1755.

In one of William Stafford's poems, ***Places with Meaning***, he writes a line that describes my father's relationship with his home.

“There are people who always belong wherever Earth brings them.”

I do not think that my father ever once thought about living anywhere other than that place he called the homeplace.

I will never again see him in that place, sitting in his chair beside the fireplace; never again sit at the dinner room table with him at the head.

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For nearly ninety years, he was in his home but now with great sadness and a sense of helplessness, he will be moved by his loved ones to live out his remaining time in another place.

This story of my family may also be the story of your family today or some day. It is a modern day reality, I am fearful of outliving my usefulness. Many of us will live long enough to be moved out of our homeplace to a place filled with strangers and fellow sojourners.

Wendell Berry, in ***A Place on Earth***, summons up my fears, and maybe your fears:

Most of all Jack is afraid that before he dies he will be sick and unable to attend to himself. Death does not worry him so much. He thinks of dying as a kind of job that will have to be done, but the thought of sickness makes him afraid. He fears living on past sickness into dependence on other people.

We heard again this week the story of a baby born into a world where there is no room for him, a child who is forced out of Bethlehem, a boy who grows into a man with no place to lay his head, a man who walks among strangers and offers hope to those without a home.

Hearing those stories gives me guidance as my Dad is driven to a nursing home, gives me comfort even in the sad fact that Dad will not be home again.

Jesus was born among us, not as a success story, but as a salvation story. The meaning of Christmas is not that we get everything we want, but that we can live with that which we do not want.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrew speaks of those who are strangers and exiles on this earth, and who are seeking a new homeland, a heavenly one, and have faith that God has prepared a place for them. My prayer is that my Dad is in that group and will find a new homeplace.

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