

From Babylon to Bethlehem

12/18/2016

How long have you ever waited for something?

How long had Ralphie been waiting for

a Red Ryder BB gun in the movie “A Christmas Story?”

It kind of becomes the grand obsession, doesn't it?

Some of you waited a long time to turn 16,

so you could get your driver's license,

because you knew that being able to drive

would be life-changing... true?

I think of Becca Lotane waiting for Chantal's wedding...

(She can show you pictures, in case you missed it.)

Trips to Ireland, retirement, your first baby,

your first grandbaby... tough to wait for these things.

I think a huge part of the Christmas season is the waiting.

So to heighten the expectation, we have Advent calendars,

where you make a ritual of counting down the days

until Christmas.

Last week Chris talked about the shepherds in the fields,

that night of Jesus' birth, in Bethlehem.

They weren't expecting anything,

but then there were the angels,

and the promise of a baby in a manger,

and their lives were never the same again.

Two parables from Matt. 13 capture
different ways of encountering the Kingdom of God-

Matt. 13:44-46

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field,
which a man found and covered up.

Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has
and buys that field.

That’s what happened to the shepherds.

It’s like IT found THEM.

But in their joy, they went to

“Go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.”

But what is cool is how the next parable
also finds expression during the Christmas narrative-

(v. 45) “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant
looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value,
he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

The merchant in the parable knew the value of pearls.

He had spent his whole life appraising them-
buying selling ,comparing.

He had made decisions to learn about

what made for a fine pearl,
what set apart a fine pearl from an ordinary pearl.

And when he found one of incredible, all-surpassing value,
one whose value exceeded the high cost,

he sold everything he had, and bought it.

And even though he lost everything he had to get it,
he still came out ahead,
because he knew what it was worth.
That's kind of what this next Christmas story is about.

But that's kind of what life is about, too.

1. What in life is of exceeding value?
2. What is worth living for?

We talk about being willing to die
for something or someone,
but what are you willing to live for?

Sometimes that's a whole lot harder, isn't it,
because daily choices are harder than the one BIG choice.

This next story is about some folks
who chose to risk time, status, their own safety,
to honor who to them, is a "pearl of great price."

Matt. 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea,
during the time of King Herod,
Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked,

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?
We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed,
and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ When he had called together
all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law,
he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

- ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied,
“for this is what the prophet has written:
- ⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”
- ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and
found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.
- ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said,
“Go and make a careful search for the child.
As soon as you find him, report to me,
so that I too may go and worship him.”
- ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way,
and the star they had seen in the east
went ahead of them until it stopped
over the place where the child was.
- ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.
- ¹¹ On coming to the house,
they saw the child with his mother Mary,
and they bowed down and worshiped him.
Then they opened their treasures and presented him
with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.
- ¹² And having been warned in a dream
not to go back to Herod,
they returned to their country by another route.

Who were the magi?

Probably scholars and astronomers from Persia,
a place where the Jews were released from captivity
after being conquered by and forcefully abducted
to Babylon.

Not all the Jews went back to Palestine.
So their faith and their prophecies
would have been known in Persia.

Apparently there were
some spiritual pearl merchants in Persia,
men looking for realities of ultimate value.

First they searched the Scriptures,
then they searched the Heavens.

Hebrews 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever
would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that
he rewards those who seek him.

Acts 17:24-27

The God who made the world and everything in it,
being Lord of heaven and earth,
does not live in temples made by man,

²⁵ nor is he served by human hands,
as though he needed anything,
since he himself gives to all mankind
life and breath and everything.

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind
to live on all the face of the earth,
having determined allotted periods
and the boundaries of their dwelling place,

²⁷ that they should seek God,
and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him.

And so the God of the Jews was
(and is) not only the God of the Jews,
but the God of all of humanity, and of the whole universe.

And the magi figured that out... have you?

They sought the ultimate “Pearl of Great Price” -
the king of the Jews, worthy of worship,
and the best gifts they had to bring.

This child was worth the inconvenience
of caravanning from Babylon to Bethlehem-
100’s and 100’s of miles, by camel or donkey or horseback.

This is NOT “pack up the minivan”
and face a few hours on the interstate.

They calculated that
this child was worth the risks and dangers,
because this was a perilous journey,
Herod only one threat among many.

Something about what Scripture said
about what this child could bring
compelled them to take the trip.

It took months, maybe years,
to make the arrangements, to make the trip,
to get detained in Herod’s court, to finally find the child.

What gave them their tenacity, their perseverance?

I think when you seek fine pearls long enough,
you no longer want to settle for things that won’t satisfy,
for cheap thrills or sensual indulgence-
the indulgence of the 5 senses,
supposedly “the finer things in life.”

At some point,
they came to the conclusion of the writer of I John 2:15-17

- ¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world.
If anyone loves the world,
the love of the Father is not in him.
- ¹⁶ For all that is in the world—
the desires of the flesh
and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—
is not from the Father but is from the world.
- ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires,
but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

I think they had tried all that stuff,
and found it wanting, empty.
And so they bring their best “stuff”
to him who ultimately needs no stuff
because he created the universe,
but they can’t think of a better way to honor him,
and “they worshipped him.”

We all worship something.
Something is of ultimate value to each one of us.
It might be our free time,
our creature comforts, our family, our political system.

It might be women’s rights, or men’s rights, popularity,
or fame, or fortune, or security, or sex, or or or...

But we all worship something.
Jesus and Paul are in agreement that
it is not who you give lip service to,
but the one that your lifestyle reflects,
that is your true Lord.

Traveling for real, not a virtual trip,
from Babylon to Bethlehem,

that's a clue that when they found the house where
the child was staying, that their worship would be legit.

Are you willing to travel for the Christ Child
this holiday season?

How far?

1. To the Homeless Shelter?
2. To Culpeper?
3. To visit a shut-in,
4. To babysit someone's kids,
5. To sit with and listen to a depressed or grieving person-
(You know, that's not a whole lot of fun.
But it is SO necessary, esp. at this time of year.)
6. How far are you willing to travel,
to worship through your actions, the Christ Child?

I tend to be a holiday grump... no, really.

I don't want anyone telling ME what to do with my holidays-
not my kids,
not my relatives, not my culture.

1. I don't do Black Friday.
2. I don't do Cyber Monday... bah, humbug.
3. I don't send out Christmas cards.
4. I don't decorate my house.
5. I DO watch A Charlie Brown Christmas, if I can find it...
6. I hate to shop, I hate crowds, noise, traffic...

(Bah, humbug.)

So you can imagine how I felt
when son Jonathan arranged the whole holiday for me.

Nancy can testify how grumpy I was
about my son telling ME what my puppies could do
and where they could stay when we traveled
down THERE for Christmas.

So how far was I willing to go for the Christ Child-
Jesus, not Maxwell?

Maybe I had to get over myself
and do what my parents never did,
and drive to my kid's house for Christmas.

And it will be fabulous, and I will be so glad I did it,
to be there for Max's first Christmas,
and hopefully many more Christmases to come.

But sometimes the depression shouts rather loudly,
and I need to be reminded of what and who I worship,
and how far he wants me to go to worship him,
in actions, not just in words.

Where is Jesus sending you, this holiday season?
How far will YOU go to worship the Prince of Peace,
and Redeemer of the World?