A CAMEL ON THE ROOF

Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

January 3, 2021

We begin with a story from a collection of the lives of saints—the saints of Islam—which concerns a king of Balkh (now northern Afghanistan) named Ebrahim ibn Adam. Ebrahim was wealthy according to every earthly measure. At the same time, however, he sincerely and restlessly strove to be wealthy spiritually as well.

“One night the king was roused from sleep by a fearful stumping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: ‘Who’s there?’ ‘A friend,’ came the reply from the roof. ‘I’ve lost my camel.’

Perturbed by such stupidity, Ebrahim screamed: ‘You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?’ ‘*You* fool!’ the voice from the roof answered. ‘Are you looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a golden bed?’”

The story goes on, according to Jesuit theologian Walter Burghardt, to tell how these simple words filled the king with such terror that he arose from his sleep to become a most remarkable saint.

The camel on the roof raises the Epiphany question, *Where are you looking for God?* This compelling question of life properly stands at the beginning of a new year, just as *Where have you found God?* nicely serves as a question to cap a year’s closing. Each one of our texts raises the camel-on-the-roof question in one form or another. Each text is a camel-on-the-roof reminder that God is not to be found where the world’s princes and powers reside. Each text calls us to be like the king’s friend, willing to make a fool of ourselves asking the camel-on-the-roof question to a world busy seeking God in all the wrong places; willing to rouse the world with the message of *“Arise, shine, for your light has come.”*

There is another Arabic story of “Seventeen Camels” that tells of a Mohammedan who died and left his seventeen camels to be divided among his three sons. One was to receive one ninth; one was to get one half; and the third son was to inherit one third of the camels. Seventeen camels, however, aren’t evenly divisible by three. Hence the three sons argued long and loud about what to do. In desperation they agreed to let a certain wise man decide for them. He was seated in front of his tent with his own camel staked out back. After hearing the case the wise man took his own camel and added it to the other seventeen camels. He then took one ninth of the eighteen, or two camels. To another he gave one half, or nine camels. And to the third he gave one third, or six camels. On top of it all, he still had his own camel left!

Many of us try to find God and solve the problems of life by logical, calculating schemes that insure we receive our share. But God is to be found in receiving, not grasping; in giving, not claiming our rights.

These texts today are emphatic: God’s ministers and prime ministers, the friends and fools of the world, have a light to shine in the darkness, an illumination from God that can raise the roof of the world’s kings and princes, presidents and prime ministers. As we turn over a new year, one thing is sure: more and more people are trying to find a way to God—as in, find a doorway to ultimate power-- by climbing the ladders of success and power and respectability. In these days of the twenty-first century, as it has been for ten thousand years, the pursuit of money and power shows up as one of the most powerful mystery religions ever to show its face in the history of humanity.

It is hardly surprising that the Magi, following the star of a king, of a new, powerful ruler, chose to journey to Jerusalem first. Jerusalem had long been the home of those who shaped the destiny of the land around them.

And yet Bethlehem is only a few miles from Jerusalem – a suburb of the grander city, in today’s geography. The name Bethlehem means ‘house of bread,’ defining Bethlehem as a small farming village focused on growing grain, just like a hundred other struggling communities of that era. But despite its apparent poverty and plainness, those who were wise in Judea, those who had read the prophets, knew the heritage of Bethlehem which made it special, her intimate connection to the royal lineage of Israel, her heritage as the birthplace of kings.

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah

are by no means least among the rulers

of Judah;

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd my people Israel.

This makes it all the more imperative that the Epiphany News is that God is found in incarnation, in the humility of birth in a stable. As startling as a camel on a roof, is the Christian message that the vulnerability of a life of homelessness, and the suffering of death on a cross, are heralded as marks of God’s most powerful work in human life. Both our chosen texts this morning remind us that light has come upon the “little ones” to share with the ‘learned,” a light more brilliant than the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night; more brilliant than the ‘thousand points of light” shining in the darkness. Christians are called to offer a ministry of light and a message of illumination to those in power. In the words of Carl F.H. Henry, former editor of *Christianity Today,* “The divine mandate is to beam light, sprinkle salt, knead leaven into an otherwise hopeless world.”

And what is this message? “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” From what direction does it come? Not from economics or wealth of nations, regardless of Alexander Pope’s 1738 update of Homer’s original maxim. In his *Imitations of Horace*, Pope says “Get place and wealth if possible with Grace; If not, by any means, get wealth and place.”

Not from education or the wisdom of the world. Not from science or technology. Not from star wars notions or war starred nations. The Magi point us to where the world’s best hope, the world’s only salvation comes: bowing before the Christ who is found and served in “the places that stink and where no one loves,” St. Theresa’s definition of hell. It describes equally well the world of America’s “great” cities and the world of the Smoky Mountains – not simply the beautiful Smoky Mountains of Tennessee, but the Smoky Mountains of Manila where thousands of people live, dine, and die on the smoldering, stinking garbage dumps of the city.

A remarkable Hassidic rabbi, Levi Yitzhak of the town of Berdichev in Ukraine, used to say that he had discovered the meaning of love from a drunken peasant. The rabbi was visiting the owner of a tavern in the Polish countryside. As he walked in, he saw two peasants at a table. Both were gloriously drunk. Arms around each other, they were protesting how much each loved the other. Suddenly Ivan said to Pietr, “Pietr, tell me, what hurts me?” bleary-eyed, Pietr looked at Ivan: “Ivan, how do I know what hurts you?” Ivan’s answer was swift: “If you don’t know what hurts me, how can you say you love me?”

Theologian/Psychotherapist Ann Ulanov, gives an example of someone “living love into the world. She tells the story of the Harlem woman recently discovered by the press who for forty ‘years has been taking into her home the infants of drug-addicted prostitutes, and raising them as her own. “She is now in her eighties and very well known in Harlem. Women come and leave their babies on her doorstep. The babies they bring are addicted.

She does not treat them with drugs, which is the usual medical way with children. She said in one interview: ‘I love them back into being.’ That means holding the infants and walking up and down with them, singing and talking to them as they suffer withdrawal from the drugs. If the babies are made well, and the mothers have kicked their own habits, she gives the babies back to their mothers. Recently, she has added to her family babies afflicted with AIDS. There, in her, is the love we have been talking about, love pulled into the world, love brought almost violently back into circulation.”

Love incarnated, given flesh and impact. This is where we find God, yes?