

WHICH WAY TO BETHLEHEM?<sup>1</sup>  
Luke 2: 15  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.* With those familiar words from Luke's story of the shepherds, we hear a theme common to all the stories of Christmas. The theme is that of a journey. Mary and Joseph are said to have traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The magi are said to travel from the east to Jerusalem, following a star. When every story of the birth of Jesus speaks of traveling toward Bethlehem, we would do well to pay attention. Christmas is clearly about a journey.

I

And so is our life. For many of us, the journey toward faith travels down ~~%Doubt Boulevard+~~ and turns at the corner of ~~%Skeptical Square.+~~ Many of us can attest to that, even if we were raised in a religious home. It is not only easy, but almost a given that at some point we would question the religious assumptions of our parents and the culture in which we were raised. In every generation we are encouraged toward skepticism by those who have not moved beyond the questions of Philosophy 101. The so-

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called new atheism+is nothing more than a rehashing of the old atheism that asks the same tired questions: Does religion cause violence? Is religion disproved by science? Is God just a projection of our ideal parent? And on and on.

There is a lot of confusion about the journey of faith, much of which is caused by the notion that religious faith is a puzzle to be solved, rather than a mystery to be experienced. With a puzzle, the picture doesn't make complete sense until all the pieces are in place. Religion, to some, is putting the pieces of a puzzle together until you have all the right answers. To them, religious faith is like a good detective novel in which everything becomes clear in the end. And there are plenty of people who think they have solved the puzzle, have all the answers, and see everything clearly. If you don't believe them, just ask! The implication is that if you still have questions, you have less than adequate faith!

We contend, on the other hand, that religious faith is more of a mystery than a puzzle. When we stand before a mystery, we do not throw up our hands and give up even trying to understand. Rather, we reach out for collective wisdom while at the same time admitting that there are some things we will never understand rationally. Living in the mystery means constantly asking questions.

The road to Bethlehem is full of questions. There is Joseph, overwhelmed with questions when he finds out that Mary is, as the King James Version worded it, *great with child*. What was he to do? And Mary herself, confronted with the news, is filled with more questions than answers. Then the other leading characters in the story are also filled with questions: the shepherds terrified over a vision of angels over the Judean hillside; the magi asking "Where is the one born king?" the poor overworked innkeeper asking, "Where in the world can I put these two people who obviously need some shelter?" All of them filled with questions!

Einstein famously commented that there are two ways of seeing the world: as if everything is a miracle or as if nothing is a miracle. The Christmas story, more than most, invites us into the world of miracle.

## II

So we ask: which way do we go in order to get to Bethlehem? Which is another way of asking, how do we travel from skepticism to faith? How do we move from viewing the manger scene as little more than a fairy tale, a wonderful story that provides a brief escape from the real world in which we live, to a meaningful experience of mystery in which we feel the

wonder of God's grace and give thanks that we live at the intersection of mystery and knowledge.

Thankfully, the Bible stories themselves suggest different routes we can take. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, has the story of the magi, a class of eastern intellectuals who were known for their ability to interpret the movement of stars and planets in the heavens. They were part of the first century academic elite, and naturally they seek out their fellow academics in Jerusalem and ask, *Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*

The suggestion here is that one way to Bethlehem, one way to deep religious faith, is through academics! I know that the intellectual approach to faith is spurned by many and even derided by some, but we know from experience that many people have found their way to Bethlehem through the intellect. Far from ruining their faith, academia has deepened their faith. Before we join the chorus of those who assume that intellectuals uniformly reject deep religious faith, we would do well to be reminded that many leading intellectuals are also people of genuine faith, people for whom Bethlehem represents not a rejection of reality but the deepest reality they know. They concur with the conclusion of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the world-renowned French paleontologist, that ~~we~~ we are not

human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.+

But there are other routes to Bethlehem in these stories. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem as a nuclear family going about the business of life. They were doing what they had to do to pay taxes. I can think of few things less conducive to spirituality than paying taxes! Yet that was their route to Bethlehem!

The suggestion here is that one way to deep religious faith is through the ordinary, faithful, daily living of life: committing to one another, loving one another, paying your bills, taking out the garbage, washing the dishes, going to work, buying the groceries, keeping your promises, writing thank you notes, contributing to good causes, caring for children, supporting your church, being on time, keeping appointments, walking the dog, voting in elections, and attending committee meetings. Those ordinary things can become a route to deep faith, a way to Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph were going to Bethlehem, not because they wanted give birth to the Son of God, but because they were told to pay their taxes! They were just fulfilling their responsibility, going about their business. That, thankfully, is also a way to deep faith.

But there is still more: look at the story of the shepherds. The shepherds go to Bethlehem by way of a dramatic, heavenly revelation. They saw visions of angels; they heard voices; they made a conscious decision to go to Bethlehem *to see this thing that has taken place*. Such dramatic religious experiences are not uncommon, and they are the honest testimony of many people. They have come to deep faith through some overpowering spiritual experience. That is an authentic route to Bethlehem.

The magi need not doubt the experience of the shepherds; the shepherds need not diminish the intellectual journey of the magi; and neither the shepherds nor the magi have any reason to look with disdain on the ordinary family journey of Mary and Joseph who made it to Bethlehem because they had to pay a tax bill. All three ways are legitimate routes to Bethlehem.

### III

Not all of us will follow the road of scholarship. Not all of us will experience the divine in ordinary family responsibilities. Not all of us will have dramatic spiritual experiences. But all roads to Bethlehem converge in worship, where we view the manger scene not as a puzzle to be figured out, but as a mystery to be lived out in a spirit of humility and gratitude.