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Joy. Or The Eye of the Storm

Matthew 1:18-25 and 2:1-8, 16-17 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.... In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 '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.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.".... 16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

I once read a sermon in which the preacher described what it was like to experience a hurricane. Vividly, he described "the drenching rains, screaming winds, trees uprooted, branches flying through the air, broken power lines crackling on the pavements."¹ Now, while I have never experienced a hurricane up close and personal,

¹Edmund Steimle, "The Eye of the Storm," in Thomas Long and Cornelius Plantinga, eds., *a Chorus of Witnesses : Model Sermons for Today's Preacher* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994). I am indebted to this sermon for the "eye of the storm" trope and have gratefully used some of Steimle's phrasings and insights.

growing up in Texas and spending a decade or so in the Midwest, I *have* experienced more than a few hailstorms and even tornados in their fury. The one I remember most was when I was in the fourth grade. All that spring day, there on the southern suburbs of Ft. Worth, right up next to the rolling prairie, the winds had been very gusty and the bluish clouds had been building to towering heights and scudding there way through the sky colliding with one another. By afternoon, though, the clouds began to crowd together, dark and brooding. Slowly the sky turned a purplish-black color, and the birds began singing as if it were nightfall. The winds, already gusty, then grew even stronger and then slowly, almost hesitantly even, the rain began to fall, giant drops that made splatting sounds like marbles dropped in the mud. And then hail began, also slowly at first, but then the heavens opened up and it sound like loads of buckshot hitting the roof. And then as we all sat huddled there in our classroom, we could see over the top of the window sill, on the horizon, two or three funnel clouds and we heard the distant sound of glass breaking. It was truly scary and it has stayed in my mind all these years.

But then, all of a sudden like someone had turned a switch the rain stopped and the hail stopped and the winds died down and suddenly it was still. And then a hole opened up in the angry clouds, a shaft of light broke through, and the sun lighted up the playground and prairie beyond. Suddenly, if you will, “all was calm, all was bright.” But then, just as suddenly it started in again – the rain, the wind, the hail. But, oh that moment of the light breaking through was stunning; it took our breaths away. If this had been a hurricane, that moment would have been the eye of the storm, as described by so many of those who have lived through hurricanes when for a moment the storms cease and the light breaks through before the other side of the hurricane hits.

Christmas is something like that moment, something like that experience of that shaft of sunlight, something like the eye of the storm. For indeed, make no mistake, the

child who came on that night so long ago came indeed at the center of a storm – a storm both before and after His birth. Think of the storm before: the turbulent history of the Hebrew people, who had seen their little corner of Asia marched over by armies time after time, who had been swept into captivity in Babylon, who had seen their Holy City desecrated, and whose life and livelihood were now under Roman oppression. And then think of the storm that comes after: Think about what followed that silent night, holy night. The massacre of all those innocent male children by King Herod in his frantic effort to do away with this child. Think of the storm around that child as he grew up: those who thought Him crazy, those who turned away, those who plotted against Him. Think of the angry mob crying violence to this child on Good Friday and then the death of this child by the power and might and caprice of Roman law. And think further of the storms that have continued, in our world, and in that still beleaguered and war-torn corner of Asia even now, the powers of death and darkness that have continued, in too many different forms, down to our own day.

What you and I tend to forget sometimes is that these lovely stories of the birth of that child – the manger and the angels and the shepherd and the sheep; the visit from the wise men – are not just children's stories. They are adult stories for adult Christians, stories which can, no doubt, light up the lives of children too but which are, in the end, stories that were remembered, written down, preserved and treasured by the adult members of those early fledgling Christian communities. Now why is that fact so important? It's because the people that preserved and told and re-told these stories of the first Christmas were not naive or unrealistic or untouched themselves by the storms of life. They knew the score; their eyes were wide-open. They knew about the storms before that child's birth, and they knew – first hand – of the storms after.

But the very fact that they could and did remember, preserve, and write down

this story of the first Christmas means that even though they were well aware of the storms of life, nevertheless they believed in the message that that child had brought, the message and the life that inspired the wise men to give those gifts and to make that long journey in homage. They believed that in the birth of Christ they had been shown that the storms of life were not and were never the last word on things. No, they believed that that moment of calm, that eye of the storm, that light of the star that led the wise men was what was really real, finally most true. The story of Christmas is not just a story for idealists or those with blinders on; it is not just a bit of nostalgia or just soft words which lull us for awhile but which must be put away when the tree comes down and the wrappings are consigned to the trash. No, the story of Christmas is precisely for all those – and that would include all of us, wouldn't it? – who do know the score, who do know and feel and are buffeted and sometimes battered by the storms of life all around us and can nonetheless say “Emmanuel, God is with us.” This Christmas story is not a forgetting in the face of the storm, it is not a dose of anesthesia in the face of a sometimes sharp world. No, it is a story that we tell and remember and tell again and again precisely because we do know the storm – the hurts and pains of life, the oppression, the grief, the warring madness of the world – and yet we also know that moment of calm in the midst of the storm, that star that led those wise men, give us a sure and certain hope even in the midst of it all. And, in fact, that is exactly we connect with your topic of the morning, “Joy.” For what the shepherds discovered, what you and I can discover, is that in fact even amidst the storms of life, even amidst the hurts and the betrayals, even amidst the pain, we can still know a deep kind of joy.

For in this season, as we come closer to the manger where that child will lay, and as we see in the distance the wise men making their way to worship and acknowledge him, in that moment, in that eye of the storm, we can indeed rejoice in our hope born of the conviction that any storms of violence or destruction or grief or war do not have the

last word. No, for it is God who gives that moment of silent night, that moment of calm, that piercing moment of clarity amidst it all, and it is God who has the last word.

And, in the end, today's scripture of the story of the Wise Men's visit to honor and worship Christ is finally a challenge to us. It is a challenge to us to live out this joy that we have been given by bringing our best gifts to honor the good news of life abundant and life eternal, the good news that no matter what God is with us. We honor Jesus by bringing him our gifts; we show that we are and want to be loyal to what God has done by bringing our best. The wise men brought their best gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. And yet, when you think about it, their best gift was really, finally, **themselves**. It was their attitude of worship, it was their willingness to take the risks of a long and costly journey to bring themselves before God in homage to Christ; it was their joy at being able to offer something special to Him and to his earthly family; it was their minds and their hearts that they brought to Jesus when they made the perilous decision to disobey Herod. In short, again, their best gifts, the gifts that expressed their deepest joy, were themselves.

And it is the same for us in this Christmas season 2000 years later. The best gifts, the most joy-filled gifts, are not material ones, but relationships. The best gifts, the most joy-filled gifts, are not measured in money but in the lives that are changed. The best gifts, the most joy-filled gifts, are those words and actions and deeds of ours that can indeed create an eye of calm in the middle of someone's storm of a life. The late Charles Schultz, creator of the long-running cartoon strip Peanuts, reminds us of how this is so when he asks folks to take the following little test: Schultz first suggests that you try to name the following: the five wealthiest people in the world, the last five Heisman trophy winners, the last five winners of the Miss America, five people who have won the Nobel or Pulitzer Prize, and the last five Academy Award winners for best

actor or actress. Can't do it? Neither could I. But then Schutz says try this test instead: Name two teachers who aided your journey through school, name three friends who have helped you through a difficult time, name five people who have taught you something worthwhile, name five people who have made you feel appreciated and special, five people you enjoy spending time with. That test is easy, isn't it? And I'll bet you have choices left over!

The best gift, the most joy-filled gift, that you can give, the best gift, the most joy-filled gift, that you can be, in this harried, holy season is yourself, reaching out with life-giving relationships to others. Reaching out through word, and gesture and deed to those who are hurting or hopeless, those who are hungry or homeless, those who are perplexed or puzzled, those who are defeated and dispirited, those who need to know that God cares, God cares. Will you bring those gifts? Will you express that joy?