

## DREAMS COME TRUE

Texts on the First Sunday after Christmas

*Matthew 2: 13-23*

Some years ago, Garrison Keillor's "News from Lake Wobegon" told of a very old widow from Chicago who undertook to place a proper stone memorial over the grave of a cousin who had died in childbirth some eighty years before, just after World War I. Because the young cousin had given birth out of wedlock, her family had refused to honor her in death. Workers buried the body without ceremony in the Lake Wobegon cemetery, and with only a metal cap to mark the spot. Now the elderly Chicago woman had called to ask Pastor Inqvist's help in obtaining a headstone and holding a service at graveside. The pastor readily agreed to help this stranger on the phone. They set the date, and he conveyed her instructions to the stonecutter.

On the day before the event, the headstone ready for delivery, Pastor Inqvist called Viola, the town clerk, to learn just how to find the cousin's gravesite. Viola informed him that records of burials from so long ago had long been lost; no one could say where the cousin's body lay. The pastor felt awful. He thought aloud with Viola. Shouldn't he try to call the ceremony off? But Viola knew of an unmarked grave in a quiet and lovely corner of the cemetery. Couldn't the headstone perhaps go there? Pastor Inqvist thought, and thought yes, yes, it could.

During the simple ceremony the following day—"O Lord, we are dust, and to dust we return..."—Pastor Inqvist said not a word about the deception to the venerable relative standing dignified and full of thought under a gray winter sky. He kept his silence over the matter as he helped her onto the train for Chicago, and never spoke of it again.

I can think of a few stories which employ a twist like this. Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast* comes to mind. O. Henry's *Gift of the Magi* is similar. The pathos in the telling lies in how one person's ignorance enables her or him to perform an act of great faithfulness, while another, who sees what is hidden to the first, chooses not to reveal all he knows, so that a deeper truth might find expression.

How poignant! How complex! Yes, a secret can serve the good of another—yet we can hardly condone every deception alleged to have been committed from compassion. On the other hand, what is truth? Who ever has "all the facts?" Our insight into our situation is blocked by bends in the river of time, bound by the blindfold our own personality. At best, when we act, we trust the little boat of our hopes—our very selves—into a fog we barely see into, and thus direct our deeds out onto the sea of history. So, in Garrison Keillor's fiction, a woman asks a distant clergyman to help her do a loving thing under the graveyard pines—to help her be herself, really. And we are like her. We derive our greatest joys, our deepest humanity from being willing to act on trust that leaps far beyond the facts we see. This is how a living faith is meant to feel—like the essence of you, in action.

But now let's add a twist to Mr. Keillor's story. Let us say that the elderly woman has *also* learned from Viola that the cousin's grave cannot be located. And that she decides the unknown grave will serve her purpose well enough. But that only as Pastor Inqvist is performing his ceremony does she realize that he believes her to be ignorant of the graveside deception. The widow wonders whether she should say something, but determines that the important thing is to honor the pastor's good will to serve her. The lack of facts beneath their feet does not alter the truth in this brief encounter at a sinner's grave. So she too keep silence as she boards the train to Chicago.

As we tell the stories of Jesus' birth, our faith mirrors this little parable. For a long time, we wondered whether these things really happened to Jesus. Most of our religious teachers were like Pastor

Inquist, unwilling to account for what they knew. But now we are coming to see for ourselves that these stories were made for love, not recorded from memory, just as our elderly widow from Chicago came to know that the wintry grave site was made for her love, though nowhere recorded.

We know how we came to these stories, along the road made for children, who do not distinguish facts and fictions. Santa Claus and the Baby Jesus wink together for them in December nights. We all came in along that road of dreams. Now we have been warned to return home by a different way. And we know we must go by way of the cross, the way of surrender. Here is some of the surrender which is sought: *Of course these are legends—the baby in the manger, the virgin mother mild, the baby sought by shepherds, the baby host to kings, hounded by Herod, evading death by way of Egypt.* Of course the Christmas pageant trades in fable, not fact. Why, through all ages, when people want to embody truth so deep that all flesh might see it together, they say it in stories, not newspapers. Why should we want anything less than the power of a story to guide us to that perfect light?

Like my elderly woman from Chicago quietly considering the good will of Pastor Inquist, who thinks her ignorant of his decision, we now see both why and how Matthew composed his birth story. As a Jew writing for Jews, Matthew's situation was like a lawyer's before the Supreme Court. The justices there do not warm to a brand new argument, implying that they are free to invent law. On the contrary, they require that the solicitor at the bar show historic precedents for any interpretation of the law. Just so for Matthew. His judges—whether learned scribes or unlettered farmers—also demanded to hear the precedents for any new interpretation of God's law, *Torah*. Matthew needed to show that the ancient and hallowed words of the prophets had already long ago witnessed to the new word. Matthew therefore refreshed his people's hearing with their own gospel—namely, that in the eye of God, the reality of the hope of a Messiah is older than the hills.

Now Matthew assembled a menagerie of legends to put flesh and bone on the time-worn oracles of the prophets. If the visit of the wise men reminds you of a phrase from Handel's *Messiah*—"And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." (Isaiah 60: 3)—you have begun to read Matthew's materials. If the hasty flight by night into Egypt brings to mind another hasty flight by night *out of* Egypt at Passover (Exodus 12:29), you are hearing right. If Joseph, dreaming he must go down into Egypt to save the Savior should recall another dreaming Joseph who was *taken* down to Egypt (Genesis 39:1) so that he might save all Israel . . . you have ears to hear. If baby Jesus shielded from Herod's slaughter of the innocent baby boys sounds to you like baby Moses plucked from Pharaoh's order to slaughter all the boys born to Hebrew women (Exodus 1: 23), you have begun to receive Matthew's story as he sent it—a song of praise to God for sending God's Christ to fulfill in one life the whole promise of Israel, thus establishing in one Word God's will for peace on earth.

But having once seen why and how Matthew did what he did, will it be hard to take this story and go tell it on the mountain? Will it seem as if we have been to the Emerald City and seen the man at work behind the curtain? How can we ever honestly repeat the sounding joy—whether to children or or friends or strangers, who may take as fact what we have come to see as Godly fiction? To be plain about it, you can't—unless, and until you discover that in these very stories, God can reveal Godself now. So far from being fantasies, I say these stories are the truest stories we tell. In these stories, the very possibility of truth takes flesh and lives.

Think again about the elderly woman from Chicago in our retold tale. After she learns the truth about the nameless grave, why might she nevertheless travel so far to the Lake Wobegon cemetery? I'd say, she goes in order to claim the truth, to establish her word of love over and above the shadow of fear and sin that her family had cast upon the sad, dead cousin. For this high work, all she will really need are symbols of death and life and her own presence. The meaning of her action—the truth of it—only exists in doing it. As for whose body lies beneath the earth, how shall we put it? When *you must* come

with honors in the presence of your God with your whole heart, the power of the symbols you use is all that matters. A public symbol of the buried cousin—that will come alive.

For the same reason, and in the same way, the legends of the virgin birth and the praiseful shepherds come alive, the traveling kings and Jesus' flight by night to Egypt, and the awful sight of the slaughter of holy innocents. We come with these because we must come, in order to establish our self on the Word of holy love, over and against the shadow of every atrocity committed against the holy innocents—in Somalia and the Congo and Bangkok today, in Cambodia and slave America and the Great Plains yesterday. What we need in the high work of worship is a language in song and story adequate to touch down in death and life. For alas, the slaughter of the holy innocents becomes real in every age. Therefore, our protecting cloak over the Savior's flight by night must become more true—must become incarnate. Get your dream, Mary, Joseph. Get your cloak and your fierce hope and ready for the flight. It will always come true, and need you.

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