

Second Sunday after Christmas, Year C
Jan 5, 2025

I am just now discovering that my hospitality skills have shifted somewhat and with this realization comes a deeper sense of comradery with Bethlehem's innkeeper. There is one vacant room in my hotel and a couple who look as though they may or may not have the ability to pay come knocking on the door; she is very pregnant and looks as if she might deliver at any moment ... what would you do? There is a stable out back, cozy with animal warmth and dry hay, plenty of water in the trough, a roof over your heads. I'll bring some old sheets and blankets for the baby. I lie awake through the night, hoping I have done the right thing. There are other guests here, and I can't turn the whole place upside down for one family. I hear cries of the newborn sometime in the night and sneak out to take a look. There is a star in the sky that is lighting up the whole town, as if it were broad daylight. No other sound at the moment.

"Turning the world upside down" is a phrase we have heard spoken from the pulpit countless times, especially when the subject is Jesus Christ. It is fascinating to me that we see – often in hind sight – characteristics in an infant that we will see throughout that person's life: O, she's been doing that since she was a baby; he had the look of a philosopher in his eyes the day he was born. The innkeeper is loath to upset the lives of sleeping guests, and yet the upside-down-ness continues with the star that will not be comprehended by the darkness of nightfall; the arrival of dozens more non-paying guests with their hundreds of noisy, smelly sheep; and a deafening sound of fluttering wings everywhere. Things are not normal, not as they should be, not as they have ever been!

Amid the never-ending line of spectators come a handful of men wearing strange clothes: long robes of heavy ornate fabric, be-jeweled head-coverings, riding huge four-leggeds never before seen in these whereabouts with manservants following closely behind. Over the centuries, images of the wisemen or kings or certainly important dignitaries vary in stereotypical color and physical features most often thought to be reserved to certain areas of the world, the camels serving as further indication that this is no scene a citizen of Bethlehem of Judea would encounter on a typical day. It is the frosting on the cake, so to speak, of the strangeness, the upside-down-ness of this entire story. That the Son of God, born in a stinky, scratchy animal shelter, with a feedbox to sleep in, is first observed by cud-chewing, dishonorable hooved creatures; by shepherds, direct descendants of King David, who live the lives of their flocks perpetually wandering in search of better

grazing possibilities; and finally, the never-before-seen strangers sitting atop enormous beasts of burden. These particular guests from our gospel today are at the very least meant as symbols to lead us to an understanding that this child is Savior of the whole world, not just our own little corner. Might they also be sent by God to restore our dignity by reminding us of the Apostle Paul's three things that remain a part of our very human nature: faith, hope and love. With faith, hope and love, these three people traveled an immeasurable distance, bringing whatever they could find amongst their possessions that meant the most to them to give away to someone whom they had never met, even willing to lose their lives braving the unknown. Would I do that? I ask myself. Would I have the faith to heed God's call, packing up all my belongings to travel the unknown? do I have a strong enough sense of hope to withstand the obstacles the world throws my way? Do I love God enough? Do I love my fellows as much as myself? Questions honored by all who are displaced from home and family and tribe.

We humans are so skilled at messing things up: we disrespect one another and God's creation; we hurt each other with cruel words and actions; we disregard those who differ from us; we refuse to acknowledge that our accomplishments come not from ourselves but from the gifts God has given us to work with; we are quick to judge and slow to forgive. May each Epiphany with its story of the three kings remind us of the best in us; that if we treasure those three things – faith, hope and love – ponder them in our hearts, allowing them to rule our thoughts and guide our actions, we will be working with God to restore ourselves to those individuals God meant us to be.

God has wonderfully created us, but more wonderfully restored our dignity. And that is the dignity we vow to respect at our baptism: the dignity of all creationkind.