

“What’s Your Exit Strategy?”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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What’s your exit strategy for this first Sunday after Christmastide and the first Sunday of a New Year? Do you even have an exit strategy? You see, sometimes how you leave, how you make your exit, is every bit as important, and occasionally more so, than how you arrive or enter. And this applies to a number of contexts and situations in life.

You are probably familiar with an old Irish proverb that says one should never leave a house by the same door by which one entered it or else bad luck will be encountered. But that’s just superstition and is not what I have in mind today.

Presidents and military advisors are often asked about their exit strategies if they propose entering a conflict or invading a foreign nation. The media and the citizens want to know how can we get out of this conflict or this country and under what conditions should we decide to enter. In other words, once we’ve gotten in, how can we get out? So, exit strategies are important militarily and politically, but here again, I’m not thinking about politics or military strategy this morning.

In business and industry, leaders often give thought to exit strategies as well if they are losing key personnel, if they are merging with other companies, or if they are changing affiliations or associations. They conduct “exit interviews” because how the leave takes place is important because it sets the stage for how the transition will occur and how the old and new entities will fair in the future. But here too, my concern today is not with business and industry.

Some people even believe, though I am not one of them necessarily, that you need to have an exit before entering into a serious relationship with another person. How does one leave or exit the relationship should it not work out? Country music legend, Bill Anderson, had a country hit back in the 60’s with the clever title: “Walk Out Backwards So I’ll Think You’re Coming In.”

When I am counseling younger people entering their first marriage, I discourage them from talking about what could happen that would end the marriage. That’s one of the questions on a pre-martial inventory I use. However, you should go into a marriage thinking that it is for life, for better or worse and for whatever contingencies come along. None-the-less, there are cases when perhaps in second or third marriages or when there are children involved

from previous relationships that couples discuss an exit strategy, usually referred to as a prenuptial agreement. So, there are exit strategies for relationships.

Paul Simon years ago, reminded us that there must be “Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover.”

You could:

Slip out the back Jack

Make a new plan, Stan

You don’t need to be coy, Roy

Just listen to me.

Hop on the bus, Gus

You don’t need to discuss much

Just drop off the key, Lee

And set yourself free.

But the exit strategy I have in mind this morning has little to do with romantic or martial relationships, with business and industry, with politics and military strategy, or with a host of other exits we make in life. This morning I would like to know what your exit strategy is for leaving Christmas this year. I ask the question because if you noticed in our gospel lesson this morning, the story of the visit of the magi to Bethlehem and to the Christ child in the manger reminds us that the magi returned to their own country “by another road.” That is to say, they entered Bethlehem by one road, but they left by another and quite intentionally. They entered on that first Christmas stage left but they exited stage right.

And the magi’s exit strategy proved to be a wise one. We’re told that in seeking out the place where a new born king might be found, the magi rather naively, consulted King Herod in Jerusalem and sought his assistance in finding this new born king. We can only imagine what jealous King Herod thought of a new rival to the throne. And so, after consulting with his religious advisors, the king instructed the magi secretly to come back from Bethlehem with a report as to where the child might be found so that he could go and pay homage as well. If the magi were wise enough to read the stars, surely, they were wise enough also to read sly, old Herod’s duplicity here. At any rate, they chose not to return by way of Herod in Jerusalem but “by another road.”

The magi may not have had an exit strategy before they visited Bethlehem but after being warned in a dream they were certainly given one which may have insured the child’s survival. And thus, when I asked you this morning, “What’s your exit strategy?” I am really inquiring as to how you plan to leave Christmas this year. Will you leave by the same old route

that brought you here? Going forward will the road be any different as you leave? And more importantly, will you be any different?

A few years ago, I went to make a hospital visit several days after Christmas and I got on the elevator with two hospital employees. One asked the other, "Have you put away Christmas yet?" "Not quite," came the reply. "We took down the tree last night but hoped to put the rest of Christmas away this evening." And then with a sigh she added, "I get so tired of Christmas that I'm actually as glad to see it go as I am to see it come."

Yes, I know, they were talking about Christmas decorations for the most part but their words may reveal something far deeper, something more profound, something sadly typical of the experience of many people during this Advent and Christmas season and something that seems to connect with the point I wish to make today. For many people Christmas is little more than a seasonal celebration that comes along and goes away leaving its participants exhausted and possibly broke, basically indifferent and unchanged. But that was never the purpose of Christmas. Those who first gathered about the manger were transformed and redirected in their personal and communal lives. We are told that the shepherds left "glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard." And while we are not told much about the magi other than their adoration of the child and the presentation of their gifts, we are told in prose what I consider metaphorical, that they "left for their country by another road." I dare to believe that the magi exited right, that they left not only by a different road but they left as different people because of their experience there at the manger. That is to say, the journey and the journeyers were changed when they exited Bethlehem.

Will you be leaving Christmas any differently this year? Will you take another road away from Christmas, a road that avoids all the Herods and their evil schemes and self-serving enterprises, a road that reflects that your trip to the manger has actually left you transformed, recommitted, and redirected as a person of faith?

If in our journey to Bethlehem we find and worship the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ, in human flesh, to redeem and to reclaim his sinful people, then we must of necessity leave by route different from those who have never received the child. We can leave behind us the old grudges, the old fears, the old destructive habits, the old debilitating sorrows, the old selfish pursuits that characterize life apart from Christ. We too can choose to leave "by another road," a road that may be unfamiliar and perhaps even threatening on occasion, but a road that will take us all on a wonderful adventure of grace, a road that will require of us that we continue singing the angel song of glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill among all people. Some may find our song rather strange, if not offensive, but those who leave Christmas by the right road will be found singing the angel's song and working for the angel's purposes throughout the year.

The real spirit of Christmas, the genuine meaning of Christmas should never be taken down and packed away like a box of seasonal ornaments. Christmas comes to us as God's

gracious gift for transforming individuals and societies. Nevertheless, there is much evidence to suggest that the world has never fully grasped the significance of Christmas nor has it been willing really to take the road the Master walked. Peace and goodwill are still just as in short of supply today as they were 2,000 years ago and the people who pursue peace and goodwill among all people are sometimes viewed through jaundiced eyes.

No, Christmas is not a matter of decorations that can be packed away or gifts that can be exchanged; Christmas is rather a matter of adjusting one's life to the will and purposes of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Consequently, it matters far more how we leave Christmas than it does how we arrive at it. The Christmas season officially ended yesterday January 5, the 12th day of Christmastide. But before Christmas leaves us I would challenge us to consider how we plan to leave it this year, by the same old road we've taken before which may lead to nowhere different, nowhere hopeful, nowhere redemptive; or, will we rather leave by that road that the Master trod and the only road that can lead our world to lasting peace, or our society to costly justice, or our world to genuine compassion, or our nation to human healing and reconciliation, or a sinful race into a reconciled relationship with God and neighbor.

Now is the time for each of us to decide how we will leave Christmas this year and what our exit strategy will be. One strategy I would commend to you is not original with me but I would wager that most of you have read it at some point in your life. It was penned by the Reverend Henry Van Dyke, former pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City and also a former professor of English at Princeton in New Jersey. Van Dyke wrote these memorable words:

Keeping Christmas

There is a better thing than the observance of Christmas day, and that is, keeping Christmas.

Are you willing...

- To forget what you have done for other people, and to remember what other people have done for you;
- To ignore what the world owes you, and to think what you owe the world;
- To put your rights in the background, and your duties in the middle distance, and your chance to do a little more than your duty in the foreground;
- To see that men and women are just as real as you are, and to try to look behind their faces to their hearts, hungry for joy;
- To own up to the fact that probably the only good reason for your existence is not what you are going to get out of life, but what you are going to give to life;
- To close your book of complaints against the management of the universe and look around you for a place where you can sow a few seeds of happiness.

Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing...

- To stoop down and consider the needs and desires of little children;
- To remember the weakness and loneliness of people growing old;
- To stop asking how much friends love you, and ask yourself whether you love them enough;
- To bear in mind the things that other people have to bear in their hearts;
- To try to understand what those who live in the same home with you really want, without waiting for them to tell you;
- To trim your lamp so that it will give more light and less smoke, and to carry it in front so that your shadow will fall behind you;
- To make a grave for your ugly thoughts, and a garden for your kindly feelings, with the gate open.

Are you willing to do these things even for a day? Then you can keep Christmas.

Are you willing...

- To believe that love is the strongest thing in the world,
- Stronger than hate, stronger than evil, stronger than death,
- And that the blessed life which began in Bethlehem nineteen hundred years ago is the image and brightness of the Eternal love?

Then you can keep Christmas.

And if you can keep it for a day, why not always?

But you can never keep it alone.

My new friends, we can indeed keep Christmas all year but only if we choose to exit right, to leave by a road perhaps different from that which we may have taken in the past. The road is found by following in the footsteps of the Master.

Prayer:

Almighty God, grant us the grace not simply to adore the Christ of Christmas but to obey him to serve him, not merely to admire the Christ of Christmas but to follow him into all those places of human need and those arenas of humble service that surround us in your world. Help us to exit Christmas by the right road and by choosing the path our Savior trod. This we ask in his holy name.