

"Making Christmas Returns"

Text: Luke 2: 15-20; Matthew 2: 7-12

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Let's imagine a Christmas past when you were handed an unexpected gift. You received it gratefully, of course, and untied the bow and then tore off the wrapping. You glanced inside as you searched for the right words. "You shouldn't have! I don't quite know what to say! My, that's very. . . what is it?"

An article titled "A Gift of Awkwardness"¹ in the Courant offered five rules of etiquette for just such a moment. 1) Show your best happy face but don't fake it. 2) Resist the tendency to lie. 3) Be thankful for the kindness extended. 4) Accept that giving gifts always runs a risk. 5) Say thank you. And, of course, it always helps if there's a gift receipt tucked inside so that a discrete return might be possible.

Ah, the awkward art of the Christmas return! We've all been there, right? Sure we have! We've all stood in lines to make the swap for a different size, or color, or something completely other. It's just part and parcel of the season of giving.

But lest we turn too fast from the shallows here, I want us to dare deeper. Because honestly, making returns after Christmas invites us to far more. In fact, I want to shift the focus from the Christmas gifts we might want to return to wondering about how we might want to return from the holidays ourselves.

You'll notice that's a much larger thought. It calls up a more spiritual kind of meandering. And, wouldn't you just know it, scripture gives us a few places to cue and ground our thoughts.

So let's start with Mary. Luke tells us: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." Of course she knew less than little at the time how totally her heart would ponder and hold the mystery unfolding. Or how long. It would be for the rest of her life.

Professor, author, teacher, and pastor Mary Luti describes Mary like this: "In returning from the first Christmas the door of Mary's heart stood wide open, even dangerously open. It all rushed in – gladness, hope, fear, consequences. She was the first still point in the resounding amazement."

All for that, I'll think I'll call Mary's response one of active Christmas contemplation. Makes me think of the contemporary song: "Mary did you know that your baby boy would one day will one day walk on water? Did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new? This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you?"²

The shepherd's return from Christmas was just the opposite. They, too, were startled with rare, numinous, holy energy but they could not keep still or quiet. "They went with

haste (that means swiftly!), found the child, and then returned praising God for all that they had seen and heard.”

I think this pegs the shepherds squarely as active Christmas evangelists. Eugene Peterson writes, “The shepherds let loose! Seeing was believing and they returned and told everyone!” And that’s what evangelists do: they run with the irrepressible news.

Once upon a Christmas past the kids and I went to pick up a “secret” gift I had ordered for Pam. It was sewing cabinet that she had her eye on. I said, “When we get home I’ll sneak it in through the garage. Whatever you do, don’t tell mom.” As so as soon as we got home Karen burst into the house and announced, “Mom, dad has a secret because we just got you a sewing table!”

Sometimes news is so good it can’t be contained! It’s given to be set loose!

And then there were the Magi. Their story intrigues me with a certain gravity. They knew that danger was near by the way they were played into the story. You know, with Herod saying he wanted to worship the child and such. They knew that the powers and principalities were threatened and that, at best, trouble lay ahead.

So they resisted the trap and became subversive. They worshipped the child and paid him homage. But they intuitively knew that, how they departed from the manger would make the difference between the Christ Child living or dying. So they diverted and went back another way. All for that, I’ll call them the first Christmas activists.

Their initiatives of activism, born of a long journey and led by a star ...required the same sequence from them every day to come. Three steps: 1) Love God. 2) Work at making a just and loving world. 3) Repeat every day.

Now I’ve done something a little bit sneaky here. I’ve inferred that there are only three ways to return from Christmas. I’ve done so full knowing that nothing in life is quite so neat and trim as that! Still it is worthy of our wondering.

Which comes closest to you as you make your return from Christmas this time? Contemplative? Evangelist? Activist? Closer even yet. Which speaks most of you as we come to the Table of the Christ Child? Honestly! The world waits eagerly to see. And I suspect that God does, too! Amen.

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¹ Alison Bowen. “A Gift of Awkwardness” in the [Hartford Courant](#); November 24, 2015; p. D1 and D3.

² “Mary Did You Know?” by Clay Aiken.