

**“We, Two Kings”**  
**Matthew 1: 18-25**

**Sermon by Ellis B. Johnson December 23, 2007**

I Love stories about Christmas pageants. My all time favorite is from Rita Mae Brown’s autobiographical, Rubyfruit Jungle. She gives an hilarious account of a school Christmas pageant in the rural south in which she won the honor of being the Virgin Mary while her rival, Cheryl, had to settle for being Joseph. These are her words: “When the curtain was raised, there was a rustle of anticipation in the maternal audience...I looked at Baby Jesus with the tenderest looks I could manufacture, and all the while my antagonist, Cheryl, had her hand on my shoulder digging me with her fingernails...a record went on the phonograph and ‘Noel’ began to play. The Wise men came in most solemnly. Leroy carried a big gold box and presented it to me. I said, ‘thank you, O King, for you have traveled far,’ And Cheryl, that rat, says ‘And traveled far,’ as loud as she could. She wasn’t supposed to say that. She started saying whatever came into her head that sounded religious. Leroy was choking in his beard and I was rocking the cradle so hard that the Jesus doll fell on the floor. So I decided two can play this game. I leaned over the doll and said in my most gentle voice, ‘O dearest babe, I hope you have not hurt yourself. Come let mother put you back to bed.’ Not to be outdone, Cheryl said, ‘Don’t worry, Mary, babies fall out of the cradle all the time’ But that wasn’t enough for greedy-guts, she then goes on about how she was a carpenter in a foreign land and how we had to travel many miles just so I could have my baby. She rattled on and on. All that time she spent in Sunday school was paying off because she had one story after another. I couldn’t stand it any longer so I blurted out in the middle of her tale about the tax collectors, ‘Joseph, you shut up or you’ll wake the baby.’ Miss Potter was aghast in the wings and the shepherds didn’t know what to do because they were back there wanting to come on. When Cheryl told me to sit down and watch the baby, I shouted, ‘I ain’t sitting no where until you button up your fat lip and do this right.’ We struggled and pushed each other until I caught her off balance and she tripped on her long cloak. As she started to fall, I gave her a shove and she flew off stage into the audience. Miss Potter zoomed out on the stage, took my hand and said in a calm voice, ‘Now ladies and gentlemen, let’s sing songs appropriate to the season.’ Miss Martin, at the piano struck up ‘O Come, All Ye Faithful.’ Cheryl was down there among the folding chairs bawling her eyes out.”

I think that account delights us because it causes us not to feel so badly about the disorder of our lives by contrast. Like life itself, pageants seldom go according to the script-according to our plans. Eugene Brice tells of a church school pageant in his church that encountered personnel problems. There was, of course, a Mary and Joseph, some bath-robed shepherds, a cabbage patch Jesus doll, and a chorus of angels with tilted halos. But the glorious conclusion of the pageant was when the three Kings or “Magi” would walk down the center aisle of the church, not only carrying gifts to lay at the feet of the Holy Family, but also, they would sing as they walked, ‘We Three Kings of Orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.’ It

would be the high point of the Christmas pageant, and the three boys from the youth choir who could come closest to carrying a tune had been selected for this “make it or break it” role. But as shepherds, angels, and holy family arrived at the church, disaster struck. One of the three kings, late that afternoon had been diagnosed a having a case of the mumps. It was too late to find a replacement at all – much less one who could carry a tune. The two remaining Kings and their harried director stood frantically discussing what to do. The musical prelude was already sounding; the crowd was gathering. The time was upon them, and everyone realized it was not going to go as they had hoped or planned. Despite all their careful work, planning and rehearsing, the moment had arrived and they were one King short. What could they do? What would you have done in their situation?

It’s not just a hypothetical question, for, in a symbolic way, it’s where many of us find ourselves as Christmas 2007 is upon us! The harsh reality is that, despite a lot of planning and determination, few of us come to the celebration of this Holy Season with the cast of our lives in tact and all the props in place. It may, literally, be that someone who was the meaning of Christmas for us, the meaning of life itself for us, will not be with the family around the tree this year.

Part of my shadowy and mysterious past is that, at Christmas, some twenty-six years ago, I was District Superintendent with the United Methodist Church, and I held a district Christmas party for Seniors at the Conference Retreat Center. I dressed as Santa (which required more make-up then than it would now) and “ho, ho, hoed in” with gifts for all. Everyone was laughing and I coaxed an elderly man onto my knee and asked jovially, “Well, little boy, what would you like for Christmas this year?” Suddenly, the mood changed one hundred eighty degrees as he decided to speak from his heart. He teared-up and said, “I would just like to have my wife back alive; that’s all.” Just like that, I learned that Santa, like lawyers, shouldn’t ask a question if he doesn’t know the answer! At the time, I was going through a painful divorce and aware of how different my Christmas would be that year, so I just joined in and cried with him. It became contagious as one after another, people spoke of the losses they associated with the season. Afterwards, people said it was the best Christmas party they’d ever attended!

There is nothing quite like the memories of Christmas to re-surface recent or even, ancient, grief. Therapists tell us that more people cry while decorating the tree than at any other time of the year, as each ornament shouts its precious memories. And each family ritual for us at our house, it’s not making the trip to the airport to pick up our sons; but a trip to the cemetery, instead. And for some one hundred-seventy thousand American families it’s a family member who is away on military duty, many of them in “harm’s way” in Iraq.

And even if no-one is missing around our tree, as we celebrate Christmas, some distant memory stirs itself and quite against our will, we remember past battles we lost with ourselves, hopes that didn’t pan out, dreams that got crushed. All of which is to say that there are very few of us who in one way or another don’t come to Christmas with a King or two missing. So, what would you do, if you were the pageant director?

One option, of course was to cancel the procession of the Kings altogether. After all, Matthew, who is the only gospeler to mention the Magi, doesn't say how many there were! But they were processing to "We three Kings"... and each singing of their particular gift. So the director might have said, "If we can't have a complete set, let's have none!" Wipe off the grease paint, fold up the flowing robes and cancel the Kings all together. And that's an option for our celebration of Christmas as well. It just isn't going to work, "She's back in the hospital again"; "If he were here for dinner he wouldn't know where he was;" "She wasn't accepted at either her first or second choice of colleges"; "He didn't get this job either". So cancel the celebration; you bring the "Bah"; I'll bring the "Humbug", and we'll forget it. That's certainly one option.

A second option is to simply ignore the fact that there isn't a third King present. Let the two boys process stubbornly keeping to the original script – "We three Kings". After all, pageants need to be creative. I have a friend who attends a church with such few children, their eight year old daughter, Anne, played all three wise men on year. She walked across the stage, bowed to Mary, Joseph, and the angel, and announced: "I am all three wise men. I bring special gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud."

And there is an appeal to a "let's pretend" Christmas. "Let's pretend that all the family problems are all worked out and we didn't say those awful things to one another last week." "Let's pretend that the empty places within ourselves do not exist." "Let's pretend that our children won't have to pay for this war." "Let's pretend that no-one's missing around the tree."

But, somehow, especially at Christmas, pretense wears thin. I read an article which suggested that all the "happy ending" movies that are shown on TV in the Christmas season, (some seen eighty- four times!) which we think will inspire and give hope, have the opposite effect. They just add to the depression, because the movies stand in such sharp contrast to the realities of our own life, and we can't pretend any more. Denial is not working for us. Is there a better way, for the Kings and for us? There was and there is. At the appropriate time with Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds in place, the pair of now-confident "wise men", right on cue, stepped briskly down the aisles singing, "We, two kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar..." "We two Kings" they sang, and the audience of family and friends smiled knowingly and they accepted and celebrated their two-king Christmas.

And isn't it that way for many of us? If there's a King missing, we acknowledge it; accept it and celebrate anyway. "We two Kings" is being sung in a lot of places this year: In a small apartment, it's being sung by someone who can't get enough time off from their minimum wage job to get back to the northwest to see family. In a hospital family waiting room, someone will be singing it in between visits to intensive care. It is being sung by a husband and father who is looking for work and by a widow who can remember what she and her husband did every Christmas for forty-seven years. This year she'll talk with her grand children about it. It's being sung by a college sophomore who is just praying he'll be back at college before his grades come in the mail; and by a

husband and wife who are just trying to make it through the holidays with so much trembling in the balance! And that is precisely the point of Christmas. If there wasn't a King missing, and love missing, and hope missing in our world, there would be no need for Christ to come into our midst, would there?!

The world to which Christ came two thousand years ago was a harsh world in which the life expectancy for Jewish males in the occupied country was twenty-nine years of age. And the world which he enters today is a harsh one. But Jesus Christ enters our world fully. He doesn't just get his feet wet in the human condition- nothing human is foreign to him. Who, then, could be lonely and Jesus had not been lonely? Who could be poor, and he had not been poor? Who could be broken by grief and he had not been grief stricken? Who could feel forsaken by God and Jesus had not cried out, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" But it is a world in which we can celebrate the two kings who are here and recognize how much that's good there is still in our lives in spite of a missing King! For we truly celebrate at Christmas that One who brings light to our darkness; love to our hatred; hope to our despair; and peace to our turmoil – that One, who in the midst of all the harsh realities is "Immanuel – God with Us!"

A former parishioner, whose husband died seven months ago, leaving her with three little girls included this note with her greeting card: "Some say to me, 'this first Christmas without your husband will be hard for you...' And it will be, but without Christmas my life would be impossible."