

Comings and Goings

K Karpen, Saturday, December 24, 2005
Christmas Eve
Candlelight Service

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The verb "to go" is all over the Christmas story. Maybe you noticed as Emily read through it. The story begins with a notice—a rule, a law, a scrap of paper, an announcement, a decree—going out from Emperor Augustus, the Emperor of Rome; and that decree puts the whole world in motion. Everybody starts going to their own home towns to be registered.

A man named Joseph goes south from Galilee up into the hill country of Judea, to a town called "The House of Bread," Bethlehem. Not only that, his fiancé Mary, although she's nearly 9 months pregnant, goes too, goes with him.

After the birth, again, there's motion: Angels come to some nearby shepherds who are minding their sheep—minding their own business, in other words. Then later, after their big chorus number, the angels go back into heaven. The shepherds talk each other into going to see this thing that has the angels of heaven so worked up. And away they go to Bethlehem.

A lot of comings and goings. And, in the center of it all, strangely still, almost motionless, a baby—a newborn baby, lying in a trough, maybe outdoors, maybe in a barn or stable or cattle shed or cave—under some lonely star. A lot of comings and goings.

Christmas feels like that: We rush, we shop, we travel, we scurry around, in the hope that there might be, somewhere, sometime, somehow, one motionless moment. One sweet, peaceful moment. One moment of truth. One moment of light. One moment of peace. That's all most of us really want from Christmas. Just one moment when time stands still. A moment we feel connected to our own past & our future. A moment we feel connected to ourselves; a moment we feel connected to the scene in the stable; and through it, a moment we feel connected to the God who made us. That's all most of us want. Is that too much to ask?

Luke uses a whole set of Greek words to convey these comings and goings. Like most old words of motion, they imply walking. At a word from Caesar, the world starts walking. Joseph walks from Nazareth to Bethlehem, though it's not close. Despite all the Biblical art showing the poor donkey stoically bearing a very pregnant Mary, and showing Mary herself perched up there serenely—each bounce and jolt threatening to send her into early labor—despite all that, she probably walked, too. The shepherds, once they decide to go to Bethlehem, they walk as well. How the angels get around, I really have no idea.

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Most of us have been doing more than our share of walking lately. It's been a week of walking. The transit strike may not have brought the city to its knees, but surely it brought us to our feet. And we walked. And walked. We walked together. Thrown together on crowded sidewalks & streets, thrown together into crowded cabs & cars.

And so we come to Christmas this year a little wearier than usual but maybe a little more aware of each other, too. More aware of hourly workers who couldn't work. More aware of small shopkeepers struggling to stay in business. More aware of those who are physically & economically vulnerable. More aware of the walking, working poor. More aware, too, of some of the frustrations of the people who work to keep us moving around this great city in ways it's too easy to take for granted.

I think we're in a different place this Christmas. And I hope it is a more open place. More vulnerable, yes, but also more aware. Charlene and I were walking up 5th Ave. Thursday night, making our weary way home from midtown. The sidewalks were crowded. The streets were full of cars and vans and charter buses. A somber chill was in the air. People were shuffling their way towards home.

Just then, we heard music! Loud music! We looked up. Was it the blinking light display on the side of Saks? No. Some over-exuberant Salvation Army band? No. Just then, a truck pulls into view, heading down 5th Ave., pulling a completely glass-enclosed trailer, and in the trailer, in full view of the rest of us, were four people dancing wildly to a jazzed up version of Hark the Herald Angels Sing, dressed only in bathing suits.

I have often wondered just how that band of shepherds felt when suddenly they were in the company of singing, dancing angels. And I still don't know! But something about a trailer-load of dancers sailing through a December transit strike brought smiles to a few-hundred of our fellow-travelers that night. And when we saw the sign on the side of the trailer that said "Winter in the Caribbean," we were all ready to sign up to go! One cold, tired person shouted out from the sidewalk, "Take me with you!" Maybe he was hoping for the Bahamas. Maybe he just thought he could get a ride to Brooklyn. The dancers smiled & waved & drove down the frigid avenue.

Where are you going? Where does this Christmas find you in your life? What are you rushing towards? Wherever that may be, I pray that you will find one moment, one motionless moment, one sweet, peaceful moment, a moment to feel connected

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to yourself, a moment to feel connected to a scene in the stable, and, through that scene, a moment to feel connected to the God who made you and who wants nothing more than a moment to bask in the joy of that creation.

Where are you going? Where are we going? Where are we all going, as a people? The past year has been so full of trauma and hurt and sadness and frustration. It's been a year of war and natural disaster. It's been a year when the plight of the poor has become more plain. God must see us rushing along on the road to violence, on the road to war, on the road where greed always trumps need.

And God must just want to plead with us to stop, and sit still for one motionless moment, and think about what we're doing, and look at what we're doing, and consider what other way we could be going. If we could stop—if you and I could stop for just one motionless moment—I wonder how it would be. To be in the presence of something holy. To spend one precious, motionless moment in the presence of God. To watch in wonder.

I know we've had a week. You've been on the road & on the sidewalk. You've been rushing. You've had travel plans changed, canceled or delayed. You didn't go where you meant to go. You didn't do what you meant to do.

And right now? None of that matters. Right now, that's not what matters. Right now, take a precious, rare, motionless moment to reflect, to restore, to re-connect, and reconsider what it means that God was born on the road, in a precious, rare, motionless moment.

