

Epiphany B 2018, January 7, 2018 (transferred), Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Nine miles. How much difference does nine miles make? Put a pin on a map right in the center of Lancaster and draw a circle nine miles away and where do you find yourself? One of the small towns just nine miles away from Lancaster is Washington Boro. A sleepy little village along the Susquehanna River most noted for its sweet tomatoes ripening in mid-summer.

Differences between city and village still exist. In spite of advances in communication and television, the internet and cell phones. Now Lancaster is not a huge city by any means. But we do boast of some rather fine restaurants and theaters. Many people still come into Lancaster for their fine dining, to go to the Fulton or Ware Center for a concert or show. The most interesting shops in the county are in downtown where we boast of Central Market and lots of others. We are the center of the region's financial industry and the seat of county governments. Our history is deep and important. Just witness the revival of interest in Thaddeus Stevens due to the recent movie "Lincoln." Our health care compares to some of the larger cities with two hospitals in town.

I've never lived in Washington Boro, but I've certainly been there. It's really a cluster of a few houses, not many. As you drive up Route 441 along the river you must keep a sharp eye because if you blink you might miss it. I'm pretty sure there isn't a bank or movie theater or restaurant in the village.

If you were from some far away place, say Wichita, Kansas or Mobile, Alabama and you heard that something wonderful and exciting was happening in the exotic-sounding location of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and you just had to pack your suitcase in the trunk of your car and see for yourself where would you first go? I imagine you would head to where the action and culture is. You would go to the city. There you could find the local newspaper or watch a news broadcast and find out what's happening. Here, in the city, that's where you might expect this wonderful thing to take place.

Nine miles seems like such a short distance, but nine miles can make an entire world of difference. Nine miles. That's all there is between cosmopolitan Lancaster City and sleepy Washington Boro. Nine miles. It's also the difference between cosmopolitan, center of power Jerusalem and sleepy, out of the way Bethlehem. Not much difference in distance, but a world of difference in perspective.

Three wise men from far away perceive a new king is born. They set out on a westward journey. Naturally they head toward Jerusalem, traditional home to kings. Centuries before a prophet named Isaiah told how the kings of nations would come to Jerusalem, destroyed by foreign invaders but now rebuilt and the center of a prosperous and thriving multi-cultural community. If you were looking for a king where else would you go? You go where the action is. You go where you can hear the news, read the paper, talk to the important people who make things happen. Aren't the real places of power and influence found in corporate board rooms and around the lunch tables of downtown eating clubs? That's where decisions are made that affect most of our lives.

The wise men know the text from Isaiah. That's why they went to Jerusalem. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, O Jerusalem. Nations shall come to your light, kings to the brightness of your dawn." So they go to the current king, a man named Herod, inquiring where this new king might be found. Suddenly a cold shiver runs through those halls of power. A new

king? This cannot be. A new king is a threat. After all those who hold power do not usually willingly give it up. Herod begins to fear what this news might mean for the future of his throne.

The best advisors to Herod are summoned and asked where this king is to be found. These are wise men themselves, biblical scholars of the first order. Everyone expects them to repeat from the prophet Isaiah and point to Jerusalem. But they tell everyone they have the wrong Bible text. You need to look to another prophet, Micah, they say. "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephratha, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel."

You can almost hear the king and everyone else gasp. Bethlehem? Little Bethlehem, nine miles away? Washington Boro? Who would ever think such a thing? What good ever came out of Bethlehem? The only people who live there are tomato-growers. Not high-powered, big car driving, country clubbing power brokers.

But that's precisely why God chose Bethlehem over Jerusalem in which to be born into our world. Jerusalem, symbol for power, wealth, decisions made by the rich and political well-connected in back rooms versus Bethlehem, down-trodden, forgotten, poor, nine miles outside of the city.

The story of the Epiphany is God choosing one over the other; Bethlehem over Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the vision of self-sufficiency, an arrogant "we can do it all ourselves" attitude which neither cares for, nor regards the needs of others. Bethlehem, where God chooses to meet us, represents a vulnerable openness to the needs of those on the outs, an innocence and neighborly regard for others. Bethlehem is the birthplace of life and light, the birthplace of Jesus, Son of God, born in poor surroundings.

Walter Bruegermann, Old Testament scholar, writes about the significance of this distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, a difference not just in miles, but also in spirit. "We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency. Epiphany is a good time to take the journey... The way beyond is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a....future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares."

The Good News today shows us one who began life in poverty, becoming poor for us. Among those who first worshipped Jesus were wise men who re-oriented their lives away from power and wealth and prestige. They were willing to travel out of Jerusalem to Bethlehem because they caught a vision of God's own new light shining in the darkness. The world, as represented by the powerful city of Jerusalem could not tolerate the light, however. The powers of self-sufficiency and control at all costs sought to extinguish the light. That's always what happens. The poor are cast down even further. The rich and powerful grasp even tighter at what they have. We grasp tighter onto the illusion of our self-sufficiency, our fantasy that we can always go it alone. The spirit of Jerusalem is alive in our hearts.

Jesus triumphs over Jerusalem. The very instrument of his execution becomes our hope. Strength is manifest in weakness. The cross becomes our victory. And his cross leads us back those nine miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Amen.