

SOMETHING DIFFERENT

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
December 16, 2018

One of the wonders of the Christmas season is how an event that probably happened during the summer in a hot part of the world got moved to the winter in a cold part of the world. It's a far journey, both geographically and in every other way, from Bethlehem in June to the North Pole in December. I realize that no one today says Jesus was born at the North Pole. But looking at the sights and listening to the sounds of the season, it's quite clear that Christmas lives there.

Truth be told, we do know why the celebration of Jesus' birth got moved from June to December. It had to do with the early followers of Jesus wanting to displace — or perhaps leverage — the pagan celebration of the winter solstice that had been popularized by the Roman rulers of Palestine. Two thousand years later, I think it's fair to conclude that they were mostly successful. While there are many other religious celebrations surrounding the solstice — Hanukkah and Kwanzaa most notably among them — Christmas dominates December, at least in the West. And the landscape of Christmas is more snow than sand.

Within that setting, the indomitable snowmen of this season are Colin O'Brady and Louis Rudd, who are independently in the process of trying to traverse Antarctica alone via the South Pole. A number of people have crossed Antarctica solo, including Felicity Aston in 2012. But none have done it unsupported by supply drops or caches (Aston received two supply drops), or unaided by dogs, kite-like parafoils, or other machines. Especially after the death of Henry Worsley two years ago in the wake of his attempt at a solo, unsupported, and unaided crossing, the consensus has been that such a crossing is impossible. As Wired magazine put it, "It's straight-up impossible to take enough calories with you to get across the continent of Antarctica."

We will know within the next few weeks whether or not that's true. O'Brady is a 33-year-old American endurance athlete who holds world records for the fastest ascent of the highest summits on the seven continents and of the highest peaks in our nation's 50 states. He reached the South Pole on Tuesday of this past week and is currently on track for completing the journey in 65 days. Rudd, a 49-year-old British Army Captain, reached the Pole on Wednesday and currently lags about 35 miles behind O'Brady. For both men, who are dragging several-hundred-pound sleds across nearly a thousand miles of ice and snow for the better part of two-and-a-half months, while burning up to 8,000 calories a day in temperatures well into the double digits below zero and wind chills well into the triple digits below zero, it's not a journey for the faint of heart.

It turns out that the journey requires as much emotional strength as it does physical strength. In one of his daily Instagram posts, O’Brady explained how he keeps his mind occupied and focused as he pulls his sled for 10 or 12 hours a day through a forbidding and often dangerous landscape that’s regularly obscured by whiteouts. He has maintained a regular meditation practice for years, he said. Some days he practices walking meditation. At other times, he listens to music. One day, he listened to Paul Simon’s album *Graceland* six times — an album O’Brady described as his all-time favorite album.

The lyrics to the title song on the album may contain a clue to what draws people to places like Antarctica. The lyrics read, in part:

I'm going to Graceland
For reasons I cannot explain
There's some part of me wants to see
Graceland
And I may be obliged to defend
Every love, every ending
Or maybe there's no obligations now
Maybe I've a reason to believe
We all will be received
In Graceland

As Paul Simon has explained, the song is about a road trip he once took from Louisiana to the late Elvis Presley’s home in Memphis. But Simon wasn’t looking for Elvis. Rather, he was looking for solace and a sense of direction in the wake of a devastating divorce. He was looking for he knew not what, for reasons he couldn’t quite explain. Perhaps he was looking less for *Graceland* than he was for grace — a reason to believe once again, perhaps a place where he would be received once again.

If so, it’s a journey all of us are on — a journey to discover who we are, where we belong, and what the days of our lives ultimately mean. It’s my fervent hope that we don’t need to travel to the South Pole to find our answers. But I’m quite certain that we won’t find them by keeping hunkered down in our usual ways of thinking and living. We have to be on a journey of discovery — geographically, emotionally, or spiritually — in order to find something different.

For their part, the three kings in the Christmas story — also known as wise men or magi — headed for Bethlehem seeking something different. These learned men seem like our closest kin among the original Christmas characters. Using tools that were a jumble of what we today call astronomy and astrology, they looked into the heavens for clues to the meaning of events on earth. The New Testament says they had seen an unusually bright star in the sky on the evening Jesus was born.

What exactly did they see? According to the calculations of modern astronomers, the brightest planets in the sky, Venus and Jupiter, would have appeared to merge into a dazzling star-like beacon at about the time Jesus is thought to have been born. In regions to the east of what was then the kingdom of Judea, observers would have seen these aligned planets shining from the direction of Jerusalem.

In those days, astrologers associated Venus with fertility and Jupiter with the birth of kings. This meeting of Venus and Jupiter took place against the backdrop of a constellation known as Leo the Lion, which was often associated with the Jewish people. The brightest star in Leo is named Regulus, because the ancients closely identified it with kingship.

Seeing these sights and knowing what they might mean, the magi looked into the sky, and then said to each other, "It's time for a journey." They climbed onto their camels and headed west toward the land of the Jews, looking for a newborn king. While the New Testament reports that the magi found Jesus and rejoiced, it's worth noting that their journey was not without significant risks. They were venturing into a region unknown to them – a region then occupied by legions of Roman troops who had a penchant for crucifixion. Despite the uncertainty and danger, the magi ventured forth.

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Carl Dennis once wrote a poem about a different kind of journey, titled "Aunt Celia, 1961." In the poem, Aunt Celia decides to travel to Pittsburgh to visit her cousin in the spring of 1930. Aunt Celia was going through life alone and had mostly given up thinking she could find a man who suited her. But then her cousin invited her to Pittsburgh, and she decided to accept the invitation.

While there, her cousin invited her to go to a lecture at the local socialist club. After the lecture, Aunt Celia forgot her scarf, but decided to go back and get it. That's when Aunt Celia discovered the cheerful and philosophical man who eventually became Uncle Harry.

But, Aunt Celia wonders several decades later, what if she had declined the invitation to Pittsburgh or postponed the trip by a week to be home for her mother's birthday? What if she had not decided to go back and get her scarf? The poem concludes with these lines:

People will tell you there are many good lives
Waiting for everyone, each fine in its own way.
And maybe they're right, but in my opinion
One is miles above the others.
Otherwise it wouldn't have been so clear to me
When I found it. Otherwise those who lack it
Wouldn't be able to tell so clearly it's missing
As they go on living as best they can
Without complaining. Noble lives, and beautiful,
And happy as much as doing well can make them.

But as for the happiness that can't be earned,
The kind it makes no sense for you to look for,
That's something different.

Christmas is about the kind of happiness that can't be earned — the kind it makes no sense to look for precisely because we don't know exactly what it is we are looking for, or why. We want the kind of meaning that can't be found under a microscope, the kind of purpose that can't be derived by a proof, the kind of satisfaction that can't be achieved by reaching even the most distant goal, the kind of joy that can't be unwrapped on Christmas morning. We want to put ourselves where we can be found by grace — the grace of discovering who we are, where we belong, and what the days of our lives ultimately mean. As Christmas illustrates, grace finds us in unlikely places: a stable, for example, or a lecture hall in Pittsburgh, or even at the South Pole.

On day 33 of Colin O'Brady's journey, he wrote the following Instagram post:

PAUSE. I've found that often during this project I have been so hyper focused on making progress, keeping warm, and executing on all of the endless tasks and challenges that I sometimes forget to just pause and look around. I'm certainly guilty of this in my day to day life as well (aren't we all). Today the sun created this incredible circular rainbow and I decided to just sit down for a few minutes and take it in. A few deep breaths, committing all of the senses of that moment to memory. You don't have to be in some "incredible" place to pause and drink in your surroundings. No matter where you find yourself today, I encourage you to take a minute to just breathe and feel the blessing and gratitude for being right where you are.

What does Christmas require of us? The same thing life requires: to be open to something different and to embrace it when it comes, even as the magi did, and Aunt Celia, and even Colin O'Brady. The gift of grace comes to us only as we venture forth, hearts open to wonder and minds open to new possibilities.