

“Tracks in the Snow,” Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

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Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I'm going to start by reading one of my favorite books from when I was a child. It's *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats.

[Read "The Snowy Day"]

The first time I remember reading this book, I was about four or five, and Chicago, where I lived with my mother and my brother, had gotten dumped on by a monster

of a blizzard that shut down the whole city for over a week, while snow plows worked around the clock, trying to clear the streets, pushing tons of snow into piles so high along the curbs that you couldn't see the streets from the sidewalks. I loved this book because Peter was just like me, bundling up to go out and play, making tracks in fresh snow, flopping down to make snow angels, clambering up and sliding down those mountains of snow.

What I didn't know, at the time, was that this book was revolutionary.

It was published in 1962, a time when the vast majority of children's books were along the lines of "Dick and Jane," showing the very-white world of mom and dad and two kids in suburbia. By contrast, "The Snowy Day" is about Peter, a little boy who is Black, who lives with his mom in a very urban setting. This was not by accident. Keats, the author, had grown up poor, in the tenements of Brooklyn. He was bullied a lot as a child, both because he was Jewish and because he was a small and artistic; and he'd felt like he was nearly invisible—that his life didn't matter to the world.

So when he grew up, he made it his mission to make other children who might also feel invisible, visible. That's what was behind *The Snowy Day*, as well as his many

other children's books that he wrote, featuring Black children, Hispanic children, Asian children, and their families. But these books weren't about race or racism—they were just about children, and that was the genius of them.

The reaction to *The Snowy Day* was huge. Children wrote him letters. Parents of color wrote letters, too, thanking Keats for giving them a book like this to read to their children. The poet Langston Hughes said, "I wish I had grandchildren, so that I'd have someone to give this book."

But as a child, I didn't know any of this. I just experienced the book as a wonderful story about a kid like me—a very real child—having experiences that almost any child might have.

Peter has an adventure, in the way that encountering the world *is* an adventure for a small child. He makes tracks in the snow, and looks back to see them—the way any child, whether in snow, sand, mud, or newly poured concrete leaves a footprint, and looks to see what their mark looks like. He goes back to get one of his friends to come out and share the day with him.

To small, African-American children, *The Snowy Day* said that they were not invisible: that their story counted; that they were just as real as Dick and Jane, and just as vivid. In 1962, that was an epiphany. One school teacher noticed that after she had read the book to her class, her “African-American students started using brown paint, instead of pink, when making pictures of themselves.”¹

But the epiphany went both ways. *The Snowy Day* was so attuned to the way a child’s mind works that Dick and Jane could see *themselves* in it, as well. They could see themselves in a little Black boy. I know I did. And I wasn’t even thinking about it. It felt as natural as air, as natural as the Chicago snow that I played in, as natural as the warm bath water where I, too, would think and think and think about *my* day, just like Peter.

And what Keats did with Peter was a lot like what God did with Jesus.

The epic stories of ancient times, and certainly the stories of the gods, were stories of greatness and wealth and power. But in *this* story, as told by Matthew, God slips into the world quietly, as a small, Jewish child born into poverty, in a conquered nation, in the obscure city of Bethlehem. God become incarnate among a people

¹ Claudia J. Nahson, *The Snowy Day, and the Art of Ezra Jack Keats* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) p. 38.

who have been rendered powerless and invisible, and causes the light of glory to shine on them.

That's what an epiphany is—when something previously hidden is suddenly brought to light. And what was brought to light was God's deep love for the downtrodden, and God's saving intentions for all people. What was brought to light is that our story is God's story, and God's story is our story.

That's certainly what the wise men saw. And that might seem a little strange, since they weren't small—they were grown men; they weren't Jewish—they were foreigners from far away; and they weren't poor. Poor people don't show up with gold, frankincense, and myrrh in their suitcases. But through the Christ Child, God reached out to the wise men, too, in a way that they, more than anyone, were sure to notice, because the wise men were astronomers. When God put the special star in the sky, God was speaking their language, beckoning them, putting out the welcome mat.

The star was saying that this revelation was for them, as well.

Just as the character of Peter highlighted the lives of children of color and of city children, but spoke just as clearly to children everywhere; the manner of Jesus' birth made God's love real to the outcasts of his own nation, while also showing the light of that love to all people. That was the true epiphany. And it's an epiphany that shines just as brightly today.

Unlike Peter, when we step outside today, we're not likely to step in any snow. On the other hand, neither did Jesus. Jesus walked on sand, he walked on rocks, he walked in dust and mud. This world bears his footprints as clearly as the snow bore Peter's footprints, and as clearly as the dirty sidewalks of Birmingham, and the trails and sand dunes of Alabama bear ours as evidence of our existence.

God walked among us. God *walks* among us. God knows our lives as intimately as we know them ourselves. In the light of Jesus' life, our lives are made visible—we are made visible—and no one is outside that circle of light. No one is outside of the story. No matter who we are. No matter where we live or the color of our skin.

Because of this epiphany, we can all put on our bright, red coats and step out into a new day, knowing that we are not alone. Like Peter, we have a friend to walk by

our side, sharing this new day that stretches before us; sharing our lives, sharing our journey.

It's a simple story, but it's a story that changes everything.