

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Click [HERE](#) to see PowerPoint slide show

(SLIDE 1)

Boden, Sweden, 80 kilometers from the arctic circle is known as a town that was created to protect the Swedes from a potential war with Russia.

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It was a place where soldiers lived, waiting for war to arrive. That has been the story of this town for decades. Well things have changed.

(3)

In the past decade, Boden has gone from being a cold war military town to an important reception center for asylum seekers.

(4)

When Yasmeen and Ibrahim were fleeing Syria, they were told that Boden was a place of bears and few people.

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Is that where they're sending us, Yasmeen wondered, to a place of forests and bears?¹

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They ended up in the Yellow House - the most segregated social housing in the area - the place where refugees were sent to live. The feeling in that space, for most of the newly arrived, was one of intense isolation, with few opportunities for social connections.

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Most refugees who came to Boden, who had a dream of a new life, were shocked and dismayed, getting out of town as soon as they could.

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But Yasmeen and Ibrahim didn't leave. They stayed in Boden. They made a home for themselves, rooted in the tradition of hospitality, a vital part of their culture which taught them they were to be hosts,

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¹ <http://www.decolonizing.ps/site/boden/>

welcoming the stranger, no matter where they lived. In this case opening up their living room to host both Swedes and others. “Be generous with what you have”...is an ancient Arabic proverb, and guiding star for Ibrahim - you offer what you have, and are sorry you cannot offer more he says.

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And so, in that Yellow House, with little space, they welcomed anyone who would come into their home. Sharing gifts, blessing one another across cultures.

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The Yellow house has changed over time. Been transformed.
Al Madhafah was created.

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In Arabic, Al Madhafah is **the living room dedicated to hospitality**. It's a place that has the potential to subvert the role of guest and host, and to give a different meaning to the act of hospitality.

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Within Two years of opening, Al Madhafah, the Living Room, was used every day. Yasmeen hosts a ritual every Saturday that starts at noon where people come and spend the entire afternoon and evening cooking and eating together. Each week a different head chef is chosen, teaching about the food and culture being shared.

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Al Madhafah, in the Yellow House, has become a reference point for all new refugees arriving in the city:

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no matter what, everyone knows they will be welcome.

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The Yellow house has expanded over time, now offering classes of all sorts -

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the Living Room serves as a kind of laboratory for refugee agencies and those they serve - seeking to understand how to learn with and from one another.

Ibrahim and Yasmeen, refugees arriving with few material resources, began with simply opening their home to the strangers in their midst. *They showed, in their own way, that act of hospitality can change the world.*

END SLIDE SHOW/SHARING SCREEN

The act of hospitality can change the world.

The focal point of our biblical story today is usually the arrival of the magi to the home of Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Last week Leah helped us understand the incredible journey these foreigners undertook as they sought the child born king of the Jews. What a commitment those seekers made to find Jesus, and upon arriving, fell on their faces and worshipped him. They truly saw whom they had travelled so far to find.

I wonder what those wise ones expected to find? Likely not the humble abode in which they found Mary and Jesus. They had stopped at the local king's palace - asking Herod for directions, expecting to be sent to another place of wealth and power. And yet they arrived at Mary and Joseph's home...

I want to consider what it was like for Mary and Joseph to open their door and welcome these strangers - foreigners - gentiles, into their midst. They opened their door, saying 'come in - you're welcomed here'.

My friends -

Providing hospitality can change the world.

And providing hospitality involves risk.

The concept of hospitality involves both guest and host. Hospitality is not a one way street. The root meaning of that word holds the idea of "guest, host and stranger, " all together. The duty of hospitality involves a mutual exchange, and a shared risk. Strangers are potential enemies as well as guests, at its root, the word hospitality has a forked path, alluding to the potential of opening your home to both friend or enemy.² We don't always know who is standing on the doorstep.

² <https://www.etymonline.com/word/hospitality>

In the time of Jesus' birth, ancient Judaism, like most world religions, emphasized one's duty to welcome the stranger, no matter what you stood to gain or lose.

Welcoming the stranger. When the door is opened, it's not always clear if it's friend or foe that is ushered into the sanctuary of home.

And yet Mary and Joseph opened their door, opened their home, opened their lives, and the life of their young child, to the presence of these strangers. They took the risk of saying 'please, come in'. And they were blessed.

This offering of hospitality was a mutual gift giving. Everyone involved was changed in the recognition of this child king. Mary, Joseph and the magi crowded around.

The offering of hospitality as mutual gift giving. Blessing all involved.

This week our Leadership team blessed the ongoing exploration and preparation to host an Afghan family seeking to begin a new life here in State College. I spoke about this possibility a few weeks ago in another sermon, and I want to fill you in on what might come next. In that sermon I mentioned partnering with other congregations - and it appears we have 2 other congregations with whom we will team up to welcome a family through Church World Service, the agency that is partnering with congregations to place families and support the process.

In that sermon I spoke of the need for a point person from our congregation to bring some leadership and organization to how we support this work of hospitality; of being both host and guest - sharing gifts and receiving them as well - the gifts of friendship and a broadened understanding of the world. Kathleen Stehouwer has stepped forward and offered to be that point person for UMC. Several others have already been involved - collecting food and material resources for a family that arrived in late December. That family is being hosted by another local church.

Leadership team blessed this opportunity for us to work together - not for only a handful, but for all of us - that might mean helping with driving, or looking for housing. It might mean sharing financially. Maybe you commit to praying for this process and this family - that the reciprocity of hospitality truly blesses us all.

Just as Mary and Joseph took the risk of opening their homes to the strangers on their doorstep, so we, too, will be called to open our hearts and lives.

In that northern Sweden town of Boden, Ibrahim and Yasmeen started by simply creating a space to be both host and guest. They have changed others, and been changed themselves.

This commitment of supporting resettlement here, in State College, will likely span all of 2022. Hopefully friendships will endure long past that. COVID may add complexity at this time, but the need is here, now.

Church World Service hopes to have most families placed by late February.

In preparation, there is training to be done, and background checks to submit.

My brothers, sisters, siblings in Christ - Our scripture today reminds us - hospitality can change the world.

Will you join us in this radical act of hospitality?

TRANSITION INTO COMMUNION

Take a moment - a few breaths as you consider where, how, if that call resides in you.

Communion, this remembrance of Jesus sharing meals with his friends - it's an act of radical hospitality. It's welcoming everyone, every one - friend or foe, to the table where we are the guests, Christ the host.

Communion is more than the taking of two elements. It's more than mini plastic cups of grape juice with pieces of crackers or goblets of wine with a pinch of bread. It's a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice and remembering that we are part of the active body of Christ.

Communion is a time to remember that we are called to continuously work to meet one another's needs and sometimes to sacrifice personal things in order to do so.....

Communion is a time of being welcomed at the table and creating space for others as well.

A pastor friend says: “within hospitality we meet the Divine.”

When we share our selves, our resources; when we open our lives, our homes, our communities to one another - we symbolically partake in communion.

At this breaking of bread and drinking of cup, Christ is the host - we are welcomed as the guest. It's within the hospitality of Christ's love that we meet the Divine.

My friends -

This is the table, not of the church, but of our God,
It is for those who love God; who follow Jesus
And this table is for those who seek to love Christ more.

So, come, you who have much faith and you who have little,
You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time,
You who have tried to follow and you who have failed.

Come, not because it is I who invite you; But God who invites us.

Come to the table, where Jesus, when gathered with those friends who both loved and betrayed him,
Where he took bread, broke it and said, “this is my body, it is broken for you. Do this to remember me.”

After supper he took the cup, saying: This is the new covenant with God, made possible because of my death. Drink this – all of you – to remember me.

So come, you who are hungry,
come you who seek yet might not feel worthy.

It's grace that sets the table.
All are welcomed, come and eat.