



*The Magi*, Cara B. Hochhalter, block print 2019

Prayer: Isaiah 60: 1 – 6

Matthew 2:1-12

Counting on Camels

*Prayer: Eternal Spirit, whom no one by searching can find out, seek us, and find us out, we pray. Let your light shine on us today, making plain some answers to our questions, some assurance for our doubts, some strength for our weakness, some vision for our efforts, and may we be the more valiant and triumphant spirits because we have worshipped you here...*

Expectations. Did you get what you wanted? Did you set an intention and define expectations? This season is one of expectations and reflections, gifting, (some of us are deep into returns and re-gifting); New Year's resolutions, good intentions. Our financial people have been adding it up – counting the costs at the end of the year. Forecasting expectations, which is the prudent thing to do. Cautious optimism is the vibe I hear.

Our scripture today positively groans under the burden of expectations. Isaiah prophesies that Jerusalem will be restored and that the nations will bring their wealth, and even their own dear lost children in on camels. (The ones lost to slavery, taken by the Babylonians, those lost at birth – that is hope – that somehow by their love they will be restored.) The mode of transportation: Countless camels as far as the eye can see, packed up with the spoils of foreign nations. You look out on the plain and it is covered with camels coming your way. “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you...”<sup>[1]</sup> (in a good way...) This prophesy has been waiting to be fulfilled for years – it is about wealth; it also suggests another kind of restoration is on the way. On those camels. You can count camels by their noses. But what are you counting on? What expectations are you counting on? What is coming your way?

My husband and I visited Palestine and Israel last February, and I noticed the different hopes and expectations among the people who live there. Among the people we met and interacted with: Palestinian Arabs and Israeli's, both sides were really hoping that the politics could be worked out so that they could get on with their lives and get along in the future. When we were there, they had mostly given up talking about hope of a two-state solution, because there are now so many Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But they were shifting their hopes and expectations to a one-state solution. We were not talking to government officials; we were just meeting with community people.

One of the hardest things to look at directly, was those people who articulated hopes and expectations that meant hardship for others. In particular, the Zionist settlers hope of a restored

third Temple on the Temple Mount, surely means the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and all the mosques currently built there, one of the holiest places in Islam – a place of pilgrimage. This hope is shared by certain Christian Zionists as well. The settler’s vision that only Jews live in the land certainly has consequences for the Palestinian people, 90% Muslim, and 10% Christian, who also call the area home now. It is where they live.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 never worked out a reconciliation plan for the Palestinians who were living there to the Jews who were being given a homeland there. 1948 is called “Nakba” by the Palestinians, which means “the catastrophe” -- referring to the violent displacement of the Palestinian people along with their culture, society, and what they call “national aspirations.”<sup>1</sup> Which brings me back to expectations again.

I do not have answers for how to unravel the problems in the holy lands. I do understand something of the humanity of those who live there. Both sides. I will continue following this story because it matters to me now, and I care about these people. They are the people who live in the region our Lord was born in. And the legacy of expectation, power grabs, faith, and humility which can turn it all around is important.

But it has caused me to reflect on what I say I want, and what the consequences of my aspirations are for others. Does my pursuit of my goals bring peace, blessing, prosperity to the world and those around me? Or does my going after my goals burden the future? It is clear in Israel and Palestine now more than ever that any hope in that region rests on people being able to acknowledge each other’s needs and goals and allow for them. Make those things possible.

There is an argument in the scriptures about who does the restoration. When do we seize restoration and justice for ourselves? When do we allow the divine Providence of God to deliver it to us? Scripture counsels the latter. Every time the people seek to force their expectations, it is not blessed.

Next week we will be observing the Martin Luther King, Jr National Holiday. There is a prayer from the *United Methodist Book of Worship*, we will be using next week:

We remember the conviction of Martin Luther King, Jr., that "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Therefore, let us pray for courage and determination by those who are oppressed ...

What part of your soul is in need of restoration? What are you hoping for in this new year?

Most of you would not be here except that you have seen your own star. You have seen indications that there is a road to follow, a journey to set out on, a cross to pick up and carry, a loving God who says, “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” You cannot be forced to have an epiphany here this morning, but you can be encouraged to check your course and your data points, seek some good counsel, get some encouragement from friends, encourage other

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nakba>

friends, consider the scriptures, look up a few old-time dusty prophecies, gather what you need for your journey, scramble back up on your camel, even if you have fallen off a couple of times already, or you have been walking in circles in the desert. Set out again, after that star.

It takes a while to reach Bethlehem, to see that baby. All those crèches would have us believe that as soon as the thought entered their minds, those Magi were at the stable, right at the birth, as quick as magic, and the scene was complete. Journeys are not like that. They take a while, it takes crossing a few mountain- passes and a few valleys, getting road dust on your shoes. It takes sleeping away from home; it takes time in a wilderness. It takes confronting our fears and being willing to read the road signs when we come to them along the way, so we can adjust our course. It may mean following our intuition and even back tracking when we lose our way. It takes some commitment to go on a journey. “Those who seek, find.” The baby will grow up to say.

The spiritual journey covers unexpected terrain. It is a journey inward and outward. This journey does not require you to leave home, but it does require you to change. To put the last first. It usually takes a journey for us to begin to understand where home is, and when we are there.

This is a rest-stop of sorts, for you to get your bearings, check your charts, and water your camel before you scramble back up on it. Go and find the God who is our home. God is alive and, in the world, – our Epiphany and Emmanuel.

The thing about the prophesy is that there is a beautiful restoration that is coming – on camels – you can count the camels, but even better, count on God’s restoration of your life and soul.

[\[1\]](#) Isaiah 60: 5 - 6

[\[2\]](#) *Cleopatra: A Life* by Stacy Schiff, Little, Brown & Co. 2010

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