

ST. NICK, OLD NICK AND SPUTNIK

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Matthew 2:12

Toward the middle of the second chapter of Matthew there is an arresting sentence. It comes at the end of the story of the wise men and, with eloquent simplicity, Matthew explains that when they had found and worshiped Christ,

“They departed to their own country another way.”

I suppose I’ve read the story of the wise men a hundred times, but it was not until I was writing this sermon, that I saw the larger significance of the last two words that small sentence:

“They departed to their own country *another way*.”

And it struck me that these eight words, in simple, common, everyday language describe what should be the inevitable consequence of Christmas. For surely -- having found and worshiped Christ -- wise men will always return to life “*another way*.”

St. Nick

There is a strange and alluring loveliness about Christmas. In this brief season there is probably more joy, forgiveness, generosity and goodwill than in any other time of the year. For a brief span of time meanness gives way to meekness. Ugliness is replaced by beauty. The drive to get is supplanted by the desire to give. And, in Charles W. Koller’s succinct sentence,

“Mankind is almost what it ought to be at Christmastime.”

Unfortunately this nobility of soul is short-lived. Before we know it, the magic of Christmas is gone. The toys which lit the eyes of our tiny tots on Christmas morning lay broken in the corner. The carols which warmed our hearts with a mellow glow are put aside for another year. Even the tinsel seems less shiny and the holly less green. Yes, there is a special loveliness about

Christmas, but it is all too temporary and transient.

And *this* year, more than any other year in recent history I think we are aware of this. There is an urgency -- an unsettledness -- within us which causes us to cling hungrily to the larger meaning of Christmas. For we know that when St. Nick, that jolly, genial symbol of goodwill among man is gone, Old Nick and Sputnik will still be with us. And these two symbols of personal frustration and world tension command that we be wise men who approach our world in "*another way*."

That we cease doing what we've always done, and being what we've always been.

Sputnik

And let's not kid ourselves, there is as someone has said,

"An awful solemnity upon the earth (this morning) as the last vestige
of (our) earthly security is gone."

Of course, it has always been gone and the Christian church has always said so. But we Americans have refused to believe it. We have strained and struggled to build a protective wall of material resources about ourselves. We have toiled long days and years to amass whatever portion of this world's goods we could. And then, settling down in the quiet comfort of our well furnished homes, we have luxuriated in the that thought we were secure.

But the sight of sputnik orbiting relentlessly across the sky has changed all that. We have been rudely awakened to the fact that we live in a world encircled. That the supposed security of our Midwest existence provides no more protection than a sword of butter and a shield of cellophane.

We live in a new world. A world made new, not by the quiet cry of the gentle Jesus, but by the raucous roar of an inter-Continental ballistic missile. A world made new, not to by the silent blinking of the majestic star of Bethlehem, but by the ceaseless beeping of the metallic star of Moscow. And while we might wish it to be so, we now know we will never again enjoy the safe, snug security our forefathers enjoyed.

We live in a new world. Scientists tell us the advent of sputnik is the most significant event since the splitting of the atom. Military strategists inform us that our whole concept of warfare must be

radically altered. They point out that a rocket with an H-bomb warhead launched in Moscow could destroy New York City or Chicago 12 minutes later. A dozen such rockets properly placed could change the course of history. Perhaps the annihilation of what we call the American way of life.

And don't think party boss Khrushchev doesn't realize that. For the moment at least, he holds the big stick. Listen to some of the quotes from recent Communist publications:

“We are the strong ones now! Come, all you people of Asia, the mid-East and Africa who have suffered the results of white supremacy; who have known constant fear because of the 130 U.S. atomic bomb tests; who have United States military bombing bases crowding in on you from 170 places on the world map; and who have been threatened with an atomic hell if you don't join the Yankee alliance against the Socialist states. Let us make the American Imperialists recognize the right of people to adopt Communism as a way of life if they want to. What else can transform a corrupt, impoverished, exploited society into a modern, industrialized socialist state? Behold the miracles of great Russia and great China.”

They make no mention of the wounds of Hungary which are still bleed profusely. They say nothing about their own atomic tests or the oppression of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and all the other communist states. But they make a great deal of the fact that two generations ago their nation was the most backward in all of Europe. That they were hitching one another to wagons and that today the Soviet Union is the second most powerful nation on earth, with an average annual increase in industrial production which exceeds that of the United States.

“*They* say nothing about the fact that real wages in Russia are 1/4 to 1/7 the real wages in the United States. But *they* make a great deal about the fact that a Russian citizen is better off than he has ever been. To be sure, that Russian citizen has only three potatoes on his table. But he is still better off then he used to be,

for he can remember when he only had one potato on his table. As one member of Congress observed: ‘The Russian standard of living, low as it is by our standards, must look mighty good to some of their Asiatic neighbors who aren’t eating regularly.’”

So Khrushchev beats his big drum belligerently and boasts that he can deliver H-bombs on New York or Washington in a matter of minutes. And a smug, complacent, self-satisfied America who once boasted of her inevitable superiority , suddenly finds herself sitting precariously on the cutting-edge of terror.

Now, let’s hope to heaven we’ve been awakened in time. We have been so proud of our technological prowess. Our scientific acumen. Our economic strength. Our atomic superiority. As a nation we have forgotten that if we *are* great, it is because *God* made us so. We are not a self-made people and we have no right to worship ourselves. It is God who has made us and he has declared, “I will not share my glory with another.” Let’s not forget that “pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

Dr. Vannevar Bush, retired head of the Office of Scientific Research during World War II, was right when he said,

“If it wakes us up, I’m glad the Russians did it.
We are altogether too smug in this country.”

Perhaps now the average American will lose some of his arrogance and stop the hollow boast, “I thank thee, God, that I am not as other men...” (illiterate .. unsophisticated... even as these Russian peasants). And begin to pray, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” For, America’s power lies not in her armies or her split atoms, but in her faith and trust in the living God. As President Eisenhower recently declared,

“The spiritual power of a nation is its underlying religious faith. This is the most important stone in any defense structure.”

And if we, as a nation, do not get down on our knees and plead to God for forgiveness for our secularism and materialism -- our shallow morality and religious superficiality -- then judgment will come. Swift. Thunderous. Inexorable. It may not come in the form of a Sputnik beeping in orbit a thousand miles above the earth. But those flying chunks of metal ought to remind us that our beloved country can be turned into a blinding, terrifying holocaust in a matter of minutes. And should that happen, it will not be the first time God has used an alien force to bring judgment upon his wayward people.

Granting that we live in a new world which has shattered our complacency and challenged our security, what are we going to do about it? Most assuredly, the answer does not lie in the direction of massive retaliation. We have tried that way for the past ten years and it has driven us again and again to the brink of war. No, we must be wise men who try "*another way.*" The way of the Christ of Christmas who conquered, not by might or power, but by the spirit of redeeming love.

Recently, one of our nation's top leaders said,

"What the world needs today even more than a giant leap into outer space, is a giant leap toward peace."

I agree. But that "giant leap toward peace" will not be taken by feverishly speeding up our production of military hardware. Or by spending billions more for huge, grim devices of war. They may help restore our national ego, they will not create a lasting peace.

Norman Cousins put it this way in a recent editorial in the Saturday Review:

"A man in need of lumber does not go running into the forest with a torch. If peace is to be made, something more powerful than nuclear explosives will have to make it. Peace will have to be made by a leadership that understands the difference between the means of peace and the means of war."

Vice Admiral C. R. Brown, commander of the U.S. sixth fleet, made it very clear that to continue the arms race can only lead to mutual suicide. He said,

“We must find another formula for defense. We are nearing the day when our power to destroy the enemy becomes totally mutual and we destroy ourselves. I don’t know what we can do about it. *That* decision is beyond the President and beyond Congress. Humanity has to make *that* decision. I don’t know of any alternative to massive retaliation for defense at the present time, but we are in trouble if we keep ourselves tied to this formula.”

Well, there is an alternative way -- “*another way*” -- and believe it or not, the Christian faith has the alternative. And this “*other way*” was verbalized in one poignant paragraph by my dear and good friend Dr. Edwin T. Dahlberg when he said,

“The international watchword of the last few years has been massive retaliation. It has been a feverish philosophy of bomb for bomb, rocket for rocket, sputnik for sputnik. But the gospel of Jesus Christ knows nothing of retaliation. Instead the Christ of Christmas instructs us to ‘love (our) enemies’ and to ‘pray for those that despitefully use (us). The task of the Christian church, therefore, if it would be faithful to the express command of our Lord, must be one of *massive reconciliation.*”

What a strange and bewildering phrase for an age of belligerence. “*Massive reconciliation.*” It seems so impractical. So naive. So other-worldly. But, our only hope for conquest over sputnik and everything it represents is to cling closely to everything Christmas means --

That God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

That a Divine Invader has come -- not with missiles of destruction -- but with missiles of love.

That if love can conquer bitterness, hatred and rancor on December 25th, it can also do so in January and June.

That if goodwill can replace suspicion, distrust and misunderstanding at Christmas time, it

can also do so in springtime and fall.

This does not mean that to love our enemies we must love our own country less. When you have a second child you do not stop loving your first child. The law of life is that things beget their kind. Apples beget apples. Pears beget pears. Love begets love. If you use it, express it and give it, love grows. It produces more love. And this reproduction is inevitable.

Our difficulty is that we have been so dominated by the terrifying potency of war we have forgotten the transforming power of love. We have been so conditioned by the big and the bombastic we are prone to smile in mild amusement at the suggestion that there could be any hope for salvation in a tiny baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

But beloved, we will go down into colossal catastrophe unless we turn to the Christ of Christmas and everything he came to bring. Love. Peace. Understanding. Goodwill. Hope. And reconciliation.

Today, we hear a clamor for more and more scientists, and surely we should in no way neglect making maximum use of any and all resources. But again, the answer to our dilemma does not lie in trying to match the Soviet Union scientist for scientist. Technician for technician.

We must be wise men who try "*another way*." In fact, General Omar Bradley says,

"We already have too many men of science and too few men of God."

And while we must not neglect the study of our physical universe, we must not do so at the expense of our spiritual values. America will make the most disastrous mistake in her history if, in this cosmic age, she seeks to beat Russia on the political, intellectual, scientific or military level. Science cannot save us. In fact, says atomic scientist Dr. Arthur Compton,

"Science has created a world in which the Christians Spirit is an *imperative!*"

Which suggests, what our strategy as a nation should be. Our strength is and always has been spiritual, not material. We will never *drive* communism out of the world with scientific acumen or

technological skills, but we can *crowd* it out with the massive, overwhelming, dynamic force of *love*!

God is not dead. He lives. He still rules over history “with judgment and with grace.” And if, as a nation, we place ourselves on the side of God and good, we shall have his blessing, and “the peace on earth” which the babe of Bethlehem came to bring will be ours as well.

Old Nick.

Well, so much for Sputnik, the symbol of world tension. Let’s look for a moment at Old Nick, the symbol of personal frustration and inner turmoil. He, too, is still with us. And while sputnik is symbolic of everything new, there is nothing new about Old Nick.

He has been with us since the day we were born. And his techniques haven’t changed. He still goads us with what someone has called “The Big Four in personality trouble makers: Hate. Fear. Inferiority. And Guilt.” And while *some* of us are concerned about Sputnik, the symbol of tension without, *all* of us should be concerned about Old Nick, the symbol of tension within.

There isn’t one of us who doesn’t suffer from the machinations and maneuvering of this spirit of Satan within us. As a matter of fact, modern psychology and theology agree that no one is entirely free from “mental turmoil, inner conflict, increased tension and grating human emotions.”

Someone has called this: “the aspirin age.” I think it is rapidly becoming “the phenobarbital age” as more and more people turn to tranquilizers for help in meeting life’s exigencies. There is no question but that these medications have their place when used under the strict supervision of a competent physician. But when we are pressed for a reason for our anxieties and fears we point to the world around us. “It’s so complex,” we say. And we talk wistfully of a quiet South Sea Island or “the good old days” when life was slow and simple.

If only we could “get away from it all.”

If only we could improve our surroundings.

If only we could remove the little irritations that constantly goad us.

If only we could chuck the whole business and go fishing or loll around on the sun-drenched beaches of the Riviera.

If only our wife were less critical or our husband more understanding.

If only we had a million dollars (or at least a few more bucks.)

Then we feel sure our problems would be solved and we would experience the abundant life Jesus promised. If only. If only. If only.

How many of us have succumbed to that addicting cry of old? It makes things seem so simple.

We can fasten the blame for our tense and troubled feelings on someone else. And, in the process, we avoid the harsh and distressing task of taking a long, hard stare at ourselves.

But, our problems are *not* external. They are internal. The Kingdom of God is not to be found out there somewhere. It is to be found exactly where Jesus said it is -- within! And we shall never gain victory over Old Nick, that symbol of our baser self, by doing as we have always done and being what we have always been.

We must become wise men and women who try "*another way*." The way of the Christ of Christmas who came to bring "peace... and joy to all mankind."

If Christmas means anything at all, it means that there is no situation which is completely hopeless. Oh, I know that sometimes we look at our environment and it seems as if we are destined to live forever in an atmosphere of confusion. We look at our children and we wonder if we are breeding into them the same feelings of insecurity and inadequacy we accuse our parents of breeding into us. And we say,

"What's the use? We are pawns in the hands of fate.

Let's eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die."

But Christmas says it isn't so! No situation is completely hopeless.

What Jesus did for the shepherds he can do for you. He can put meaning into your daily round of living. He can send you back to your mundane tasks "glorifying and praising God."

What Jesus did for the wise men he can do for you. He can show you "*another way*" to escape the modern Herods of hate and fear, inferiority and guilt.

The key to victory over Old Nick -- that symbol of personal frustration, friction, turmoil and tension -- is not to be found in running away from life or mentally pulling the covers over your head and pretending the bogie man does not exist. The way to conquest over Old Nick lies in admitting that the problem is not without, but within -- that what we need so desperately is exactly what Christmas offers -- a Savior! Someone who can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Today we are the most prosperous nation in the history of the world. The living standard of the average American eclipses that of kings only a few centuries ago. And yet, with all of our stuff -- finer cars, larger homes, electronic kitchens, shiny gadgets and intriguing luxuries -- we have more mental turmoil, more inner tension, more emotional frustration than any other time in history.

Our divorce rate is higher than in any other country. We spend more money on pleasure than any other people before us. We consume more liquor than any nation on earth. The rate of alcoholism continues to climb as more and more people attempt to run away from life through the neck of a bottle.

Instead of being wise men, who try "another way," like blind fools we go on fighting to get more and more of the things we need less and less.

The more we owned the more we are owned.

The more we possess the more we are possessed.

The competitive struggle becomes more cruel and more ruthless.

The price of success continues to mount.

The office building or factory where we work becomes known as “ulcer alley.”

And – we live in subconscious fear.

We worry about our jobs, about our health, about getting old, about the security of our children, and the more we worry about thesees things the more unfit we are to handle them. Suddenly we come to the sobering conclusion that life is passing us by and we have tasted so little of the peace and joy and serenity we feel sure it should yield.

Granting we have, as the old hymn says, “fightings without and fears within”, what are we going to do about it? May I suggest we try “*another way*.”

Instead of letting the selflessness of Christmas die on December 26, let’s keep it alive the whole year through.

Instead of limiting the spirit of giving to one season, lets liberate it -- give it room to grow -- until it dominates our thoughts and actions *every* moment of *every* day.

If the coming of Christ could bring peace in people’s hearts 2000 years ago it can bring peace in your heart today.

If the coming of the babe of Bethlehem could bring “good tidings of great joy to all people” two millennia ago, it can bring joy to your heart today.

If the Angel’s song could drive fear from the hearts of a band of plodding, prosaic, desert nomads “keeping watch over their flocks by night,” then the good news that a Savior has been born, can drive fear from *your* hurried and harassed heart in the year that lies ahead.

Christ lives. God reigns. Eternal life has come. And there is hope. So let's keep Christmas with all it means in terms of life and joy, peace and love. Let's not be like those who look upon Sputnik and Old Nick with panic and terror. Rather, let's be wise men and women who try “another way.” The way of the Christ of Christmas who said,

“I give unto you eternal life and you shall never perish,
neither shall anyone pluck you out of my father's hand.”

This is a Christian's confidence in a world quivering with terror, for a Christian knows that -- as a citizen of heaven – his or her real life cannot be affected by what transpires on earth today.

This can be your confidence, too. If only you will join the wise men who -- having found and worshiped Christ – departed “another way.”