

“Darkness in the Hearts of Kings”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
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As some of you know, and perhaps many of you may know, my family, this Christmas season, spent the last week or so in Smoky Mountains National Park, which you undoubtedly know is about three or four hours west of here on I-40, and it is a park that we go to quite often, and often at the Christmas season. We enjoy that park during this time because we are able to get a hotel room right next to the actual park and, from that hotel room, depending on our mood, we can go into the park and walk or hike in the beauty of the mountains and woods, or if we are feeling a little different we can go the other way and go down main street in Gatlinburg which is filled with food, shops and all kinds of tourist attractions, so our mood depends on where we go that day. Oftentimes we end up going into the woods first, spending the day hiking and then coming back in for dinner and so forth at night.

One of the things about Smoky Mountains National Park is that it is (at least from my point of view and at least east of the Mississippi) America’s park. It is an amazing national park that is rich with American history and Appalachian culture, Appalachian history and Native American history, with Cherokee over there in an area. And if you watch cable television, it is rich with moonshine history and so forth and so on, so the Smoky Mountains is really kind of a park of America. It has so much to teach us about the natural environment and our American history, so that is one of the reasons I have always liked it.

This year I had a little different experience of Smoky Mountains National Park because one of the days—in fact there were actually a couple of days—we decided to go hiking. One of the hikes we took was to a place called Chimney Tops which is a 2-mile hike. It is not long, but it is pretty much straight up. I think we gained about 1,500 feet in elevation as we went up to the top 2 miles and then 2 miles down.

While we went up, I noticed this gentleman in front of me who had a very odd-looking cloak that he was wearing, and as I walked up to him, I discovered that, hiking up the mountain of Chimney Tops Trail, in his pastoral robe, was THIS gentleman. *[Pastor Tom holds up a picture]* Some of you can see the picture. He is a Coptic Christian priest from Egypt, who serves a Coptic Christian congregation in Nashville, Tennessee, and he hiked that 4-mile loop up Chimney Tops in his black robe. My father-in-law looked at me and said “Tom, I am deeply disappointed in you. Go get your robe!” I stopped and talked to this priest of the Orthodox Coptic Church and had a brief conversation with him. I am not sure how he felt about his robe at that point because he was sweating and huffing and puffing like the rest of us, but I said “Are you going up to the top?”, and he said “Yes. They tell me it is very spiritual up there”. I was intrigued that a Coptic Orthodox Christian priest from Egypt was hiking up Chimney Top Trail.

After that encounter with him, I began to listen to the conversations going up the trail, both Chimney Tops and another trail called Laurel Falls. There were all kinds of languages, not just English. There was Spanish. There were all kinds of different languages that I could not identify—even one, I think, from Eastern Europe, though I’m not sure.

When we got to the top of Laurel Falls, there was, among a lot of other people, a woman who was fully veiled with just a slit open around her eyes—obviously a Muslim—who had hiked up that trail in her full traditional Islamic garb, fully veiled. It caused me to start thinking about our world today. I thought that in the Smoky Mountains National Park (in some ways America’s park) during a Christmas vacation, here I am walking up a trail with the world. The world is now my hiking partner. The world is now my neighbor. I can’t get away from the world, even at the top of Chimney Tops Mountain, and it really sort of left me thinking wow, we

really do live in a different world now, and what does all this mean for us as traditional mainline Christians?

I read this story about the three kings and the flight to Egypt with all of that informing my viewpoint. There are three observations that I want to make about this story that we are all familiar with, as we have sort of sentimentalized the three kings, and it is very much a part of our Christmas traditions and all of that. The first thing to say about this story is (if you didn't pick it up) I quoted prophets twice, and in the scripture that David Fesperman read, he quoted a prophet twice. One of the things that is important to pay attention to in this Christmas narrative of the three kings is that the story of Jesus, the story of the coming of Christ, a narrative that is told to us, is created to fulfill Jewish expectations. It is created to fulfill prophecy. It is created by Matthew to point out that the narrative of the Jews, the narrative of Israel, continues on in the person of Jesus, so there is, throughout these chapters in Matthew, and throughout the whole gospel of Matthew, this intentional effort to connect the birth of Jesus with the expectations of first century Jews of ancient expectation. So in this three kings story, we get this continuation of the story of Israel, so it is a continuation of Jewish faith that Matthew has tried to create in this story.

Then, there is another piece to this story. The story and the narrative of Jesus are then expanded with the coming of the three kings. Now, I am not sure what historians know about the three kings. I think there are a lot of historical question marks about the three kings, but it doesn't really matter because what Matthew has done is, this story of the three kings is about the expansion of the narrative of the story of Jesus to Gentiles. These are wise men, probably of a different religion. They were astrologists some say. They were probably of a Babylonian religion, probably from places like Iraq or Iran or those types of areas of the world, and they come and find Jesus and honor Jesus with gifts. The point that Matthew was making was that Jesus expands the narrative of God's love to a whole new world of people. It is not just the Jews' story anymore. It is now including Gentiles.

What I find interesting about these wise men and the way that Matthew has brought them to us is that we have no word of them converting. We only have word of their honor towards Jesus and that they go away and the story is broken, so we have the Jewish story that expands to the Gentiles and then we have this incredible other narrative of Herod, King Herod. Clearly, Matthew is trying to make a connection between King Herod and Pharaoh, between Jesus and Moses. You remember the killing that Pharaoh tried to pursue in terms of getting Moses. This very similar story in Matthew, of course, echoes that Old Testament story, but as I read it, what it tries to communicate is that in every era, there are powers at work in the world, whether it be Pharaoh, or King Herod, or an emperor or a president, or whatever, worldly powers that are trying to subvert the will of God. Those worldly powers, whatever shape they take, are always part of the story, always part of our world—back then and today.

Herod, if you were caught in the language as we read the story, was a frightened person. The arrival of the magi and what they had to say frightened him. He was then a man of deception. Herod said "Go and search diligently for the Child so that I may pay him homage" which was a lie, and Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men and he was infuriated, so he was frightened, he was a man of deception, and he was infuriated, and the story is that he was a murderer and was willing to kill children to try to kill the baby Jesus.

This story we have made sentimental, but it is a really a powerful challenge to us that we embrace this Jewish narrative (Matthew has made it clear that it fulfills prophecy.) that has expanded as the wise men have accepted and honored Christ in some way in their own traditions. It has now moved on to the Gentile community and, throughout it all, the powers of the world are trying to stop God's intent. Of course, God's intent is that we will all live together.

So, I want to take you back to that mountain trail. We are all now on this journey. It is a journey like a hike, and on this path with us are Orthodox Christians, nonbelievers, country folks, Muslim women, Buddhists, and Jews... everybody... so it is a great challenge in this day and time for us to say and to claim Jesus as the one who we give gifts to, the one who we honor. It is a challenge for us to not just say what we believe but to live what Jesus taught, and Jesus taught that we are all on this journey together. It is not just one faith's story. God's love, God's story is everyone's story, and we are challenged in 2015 to walk together to the mountaintop, and we may all take different paths up that mountain, but we all end up in the same place which is the place of God's love. So I give thanks for this journey, for people I have met, and for our journey together as we go forward, that it will be exciting and that it will be a journey of joy, and I give thanks to God for that journey. Amen.