Sunday, January 4, 1987
RETURNING FROM CHRISTMAS
Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:12: They departed to their own country by another way.
Luke 2:20: And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard, as it had been told them.

Eleven days ago, it was Christmas Day. Now the Christmas trees are dried out, and many of them have been taken down and the decorations put away for another year. Some of the gifts we received are almost forgotten. Tomorrow, the children return to school. Earlier this past week, many of us returned from visiting relatives. Already the bills for the things we charged are starting to come in the mail.

Some people begin to get depressed as Christmas draws near. Others get depressed returning from Christmas as they return to their regular schedules.

I woke up on Christmas morning feeling a little let down. It had been a glorious Christmas Eve here at the church. Three worship services and all of them filled with happy people. The 5:00 P.M. service had the wonder of countless children, and then the soft candlelight of the 8:00 service, followed by the overflowing crowds and joyous music of the 11:00 service. It was an evening filled with the joy of God's coming to be among us.

Then came Christmas morning. I read the morning paper, and these facts stared me in the face: "If this season is a time for rededication to peace on earth, the world appears to need it more than ever."

Some $800 billion worth of weapons are produced each year and are being exported around the world in record numbers. More than 1.4 million superpower troops are stationed in 47 countries — and another 400,000 soldiers of various other nations are currently fighting in foreign lands. Ironically, the United Nations had designated 1986 as the International Year of Peace.

In Northern Ireland, the outlawed Irish Republican Army began its annual pre-Christmas bombing terror campaign, while armed soldiers patrolled Bethlehem, now under Israeli occupation.

In the marshes, mountains, and plains along the Iran-Iraq border, an entire generation — perhaps a million men and boys — has been shot, bombed, rocketed, gassed, or concussed to death in a seesaw war that has benefited neither side. That's more casualties than the United States suffered in World War II. In fact, according to grim statistics collected by World Priorities, a Washington-based non-profit research organization, four times as many war deaths have occurred in the 40 years since World War II, than in the 40 years preceding it.

Worldwide, there is one soldier per 43 people in the world, and one physician per 1,030.

In the Third World, military spending has increased fivefold since 1960, a period in which income and literacy barely doubled. One reason is that the United States and the Soviet Union are increasingly using arms sales, rather than development aid, as a tool of foreign policy. For example, Soviet developmental aid to two of its prime military clients, Syria and Mozambique,

is virtually non-existent. In the current fiscal year, two-thirds of the 13.6 billion U.S. foreign aid budget is for military and security concerns.

And then a few days later, I re-read the Christmas stories from the Bible, Luke's account and Matthew's story of the Wise Men, and two startling facts jumped out at me. Luke said, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." And I thought — that's the way to return from Christmas — glorifying and praising God. For the shepherds, just like us, nothing much else had changed in their outside world. They went back to the same work of watching sheep. The ground on which they slept was as hard as ever; the weather was just as disagreeable at times, and the shepherds still had their arguments with one another.

And Matthew tells us in his story of the Wise Men that they "rejoiced exceedingly." But they returned home by a different route, Herod having set up a stakeout for them. They knew, though, that their lives had been disrupted by a stronger force. And if you read a little further in Matthew's Gospel, you discover that Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus had to flee to Egypt after Christmas as refugees because Herod was determined to kill the baby and, in a rage, killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under.

So our returning from Christmas is not that much different than it has ever been. And in spite of our personal problems and the world's problems, the way to return from Christmas is to do what the shepherds did: they returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them!

For at the very center of Christmas, something has taken place that can never be reversed. God has come to be among us in a new and personal way. The love of God became a human being and lives among us. The Christmas story is about God saying to the world and to each one of us — "I love you. I've always loved you since the beginning of creation. And even more than that, I will love you forever." And that love is stronger than any force we create.

No wonder the shepherds returned from Christmas glorifying and praising God. No wonder the Wise Men, who did not know anything of the prophecies, "rejoiced exceedingly." No wonder the Wise Men went home by another way.

We can return from Christmas with the knowledge that even though everything seems the same, nothing is the same anymore.

In 1863, when this nation was torn asunder by the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow brooded over the chasm that seemed to exist between the story of Christmas and the condition of the world. Then, taking up his pen, he began to write a poem on Christmas, one which moves from pessimism and despair to that joy and the song of the angels:

I heard the bells on Christmas day, their
old familiar carols play, and wild and
sweet, the words repeat, of peace on earth,
goodwill to men.

And in despair, I bowed my head; there is
no peace on earth I said; for hate is
strong, and mocks the song, of peace on
earth, goodwill to men.

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep,
God is not dead, nor doth God sleep. The
wrong shall fail, the right prevail, with
peace on earth, goodwill to men.

Amen.