

1) Can you think of a time when you felt clearly *out of place*?

That's not the same as *being away from home*.

A needed vacation, a change in vocation—

either can take us to new and strange, even scary places.

But coping with a *different* place is not the same as feeling *out* of place.

It is, in fact, quite possible to find yourself out of place without ever leaving home:

- Older kids come over to play with your big sister,  
and suddenly you don't have a playmate anymore.
- You come into a room in your house to find people huddled in animated conversation.  
Everyone suddenly stops talking.  
They look up at you with "No Trespassing" signs on their faces.
- You go back to your *alma mater* for a class reunion.  
All your old classmates have made a success of interesting careers.  
You are stuck in a job that's going nowhere.

The circumstances can vary widely, but wherever you are, the feeling is the same:

*I really don't belong here. I am out of place.*

2) What is it that makes the difference between STRANGE territory and ALIEN territory?

It's not so much the PLACE itself as the PEOPLE that you find there.

A fascinating new world can go suddenly flat if you are greeted with uninviting stares.

On the other hand, the icy inscrutability of unfamiliar surroundings

can melt in a heartbeat if you are met with a warm word of welcome.

Part of what often encourages us to venture AWAY from home, in fact,

is the belief—or at least the hope—that we will find a word of welcome

when we come at last to journey's end.

3) Today we hear a story about some folks who DO leave home and venture into a far country.

A star that they follow seems to convey the impression

that they WILL find a welcome in the land toward which they're heading.

*Wrong! So much for putting your trust in stars!*

The wise men stand around in Herod's palace feeling decidedly out of place.

The formal courtesies—they create a chasm.

The interest in their mission—it is feigned, forced—palpably hostile.

This is NOT what the wise men left home to find.

*But—cut the King some slack—will you?*

His Excellency himself is doubtless feeling out of place as well.

This unexpected visit can only underscore the anxiety Herod surely feels already.

Being a king is not all it's cracked up to be.

"Uneasy is the head that wears the crown;" and Herod's is uneasier than most.

Is Herod selfish? *Yes, indeed!* Cruel and vicious? *Absolutely!*

Is he powerful? *That all depends on what you mean by "power".*

Does he have cause to be uneasy? *Oh, YES he does!*

Rome is not an easy-going overlord.

Judea is not an easily ruled underling.

Herod's home is a throne on which he does not fit.

Herod is a man who is utterly out of place.

Small wonder he makes everyone around him feel the same.

Small wonder, too, that, in the presence of these strange visitors,  
the whole royal court feels every bit as out of place as it makes the wise men feel.

*Well! Nothing for them to do but pack it up, and head on out.*

*This is obviously a dead end—a mission totally misdirected.*

*They might as well go back to the familiar territory from which they've come.*

*They probably should never have left home in the first place.*

But **NO!** the star says. **NO!**

And it proceeds to shine them through the final short leg of the journey  
toward the Welcome they've come a long hard way to worship.

- 4) When they arrive at last, do the travelers receive the welcome that they came for?

*Of course, they do! I should hope they would!*

*Who in their right minds would turn away visitors bearing gifts?*

*Why shouldn't the Holy Family welcome the wise men with open arms?*

*Gold, frankincense, myrrh—these are very expensive presents!*

Yes, the gifts are expensive, all right—

and perhaps not only in the way that immediately comes to mind.

The gifts these visitors bring come with a high cost to those who receive them—  
a cost of which those who bring the gifts can hardly have an inkling.

But it is a cost, I suspect, that the family to whom they are given has already begun to sense.

I can't think the urgent call to leave for Egypt—

a warning call that comes to Joseph in a dream right after the wise men leave—

I can't think that this call descends on him as a total surprise.

After all, Joseph and Mary already know by hard experience what it is to be displaced.

Yet here is the irony of it all: it is these Displaced Persons who give the wise men welcome.

- 5) To all external observations, if anyone should feel at home, Herod should.

If anyone should feel out of place, the Holy Family should.

And yet things are exactly the opposite of what it seems they should be.

Matthew's Story of the Visit of the Magi vividly prefigures the life and teaching  
of the One whom the wise men come to worship.

Matthew's Gospel begins with a standard genealogy—fathers and sons, fathers and sons.

But it contains four names that are clearly out of place—women's names—

women, who, through no fault of their own,

would have been subjected to shaming and ostracism in their patriarchal cultures.

Mary whom Joseph takes to wife under analogously eyebrow raising circumstances—

Mary is in Good Company—the Company of God's own Commonwealth Kingdom.

Mary's Baby Boy grows up, in Matthew's telling,

to teach in parable after parable, that the Commonwealth of God

makes its home precisely where conventional wisdom would decree it totally “out of place.”

Mary's Jesus Child offers wisdom, food, care, and healing

with deliberately discriminating indiscriminacy.

He shares His gifts without regard

to gender, race, social status, religious affiliation, or political allegiance—

even though (as Matthew quotes Him) He Himself has nowhere to lay his head.

- 6) Interesting, is it not, how those who know what it's like to be displaced  
are frequently the ones who are most adept at making others welcome?

**Interesting, is it not, that those who cling for dear life to places they cannot hope to hold—  
these are the very ones who inflict on others their own sense of profound dis-ease?  
The moves folks make in the power games they play are almost always ploys  
to seize and secure a place that is forever slipping through their fingers.**

**Today we celebrate a very different kind of power move—**

**a move in which the Lord of life does not cling to the prerogatives of His position;  
but gives them up, so that all who have been displaced, or made to feel out of place,  
are freed to find, in Him, a welcome.**

**And if this welcome is as deep and wide and clear and strong as it claims to be,  
then even the Herods in our own hearts**

**will no longer need to clutch their shaky thrones;**

**because those thrones are not only INSECURE but UTTERLY UNNECESSARY.**

**On our horizons, out of nowhere, unexpected stars can sometimes blaze,**

**calling us from the comfort zones and familiar surroundings of “Home, Sweet Home.”**

**In a curious mixture of trust and trepidation**

**We follow the light these stars shed on a step-by-step journey toward the Lord of Life.**

**We carry with us whatever gifts we may have to offer.**

**And the One who has no place to lay His head spares no expense to bid us welcome.**

**THAT is a Welcome worth leaving home to FIND.**

**THAT is a Welcome worth leaving home to SHARE.**

**And doing so, we may just find that, like the magi, we end up returning home “by another way.”**