

BY ANOTHER ROAD

Matthew 2:1-12; Ephesians 3:8-21

Auburn First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana
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Sometimes, I find the Bible incredibly frustrating. For all sorts of reasons. In the case of the story of the visitors from the East, Matthew leaves me wanting more details about the visitors. I want to know more about their background. I want to know exactly where they came from and what exactly they did as “magi” or “wise men.” I want to know about how they explained to their families, their spouses and their employers, that they were headed West towards a distant land because they had seen a star in the sky.

“Uh, sweetheart, I’m headed West. I don’t know how long I’ll be gone.”

“What do you mean you’re headed West?” the spouse might have answered. “And where exactly are you going?”

“No, I don’t know exactly where I’m going. All I know is that I need to head West and when the time is right, I’ll know when and where to stop.”

“So you’re headed West but you don’t know where you’re going and you don’t know when you’re going to come back, is that right?”

“Yep.”

“And why are you leaving now? What prompts this or should I assume this is your version of a midlife crisis?”

“Well, it’s all about this star.”

“Who is ‘Star?’”

“No, no, no: the star isn’t a person but it’s a surprising star we’ve suddenly seen down at the observatory on campus. It’s something new, something we’ve not seen before, and you know something like this usually tells us something amazing is about to happen. A star like this can mean that a king is about to be born. So we want to follow the star and see where it leads.”

“What is this ‘we’, thing? You’re not going on your own?”

“Oh, no, that wouldn’t be safe. Trips are never safe on your own so I talked to some of the guys down at the college. They have some personal days built up so they’re coming with me. They’re is a group of us and we went together to buy some gifts in case we find a king somewhere out there.”

“So let me get this straight, Mel: you’ve seen a star in the sky, and you’re going to follow that star ‘god knows where’ until it stops. And when it stops, you think you may just find a king beneath it?”

“Yep.”

“You’re going to leave our home here in Babylon, leave your colleagues at the college, and go running off West to end up in some crazy place where you may find a baby king? What in heaven’s name do you think you’ll do with an infant king, anyway? Besides, we already have a king right here. We have a great king right here.”

“I know it may not make sense to you, but I have a feeling about this. I’m curious about this. And I’ve always had a thousand reasons why the time was never right to do something like this. Something is telling me to follow this star. So I just have this feeling...this could be a very different kind of king who knows things the world needs to know.”

“Go, Mel, go! Go follow your star. Go find your baby king. Go leave your gifts. And, maybe somewhere out there on the road, you can find yourself and come back a new man.”

“Why should I come back as a ‘new man?’ What’s wrong with the old man I already am? Are you saying there is something wrong with me?”

“No, it’s just that sometimes I see a look in your eyes that I can’t explain. I wonder if something isn’t missing. It was just a thought: sometimes long trips can change us as we go. So I just thought that maybe, along the way, you might find whatever it is you’re missing...”

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I’d like more details. I’d like to know more about the back story of the wise men or magi from the East. We don’t really know where they were from: many scholars speculate there were from the great empire of Babylon.

Some say they were star gazers because people believed that if you watched the stars they would tell you what you needed to know. Trying to decide between taking this job or that? Trying to decide between getting married or staying single? Trying to decide whether to buy a camel or a donkey? Go to a star gazer, tell them your question, and the stars may offer an answer!

Others say the magi were wise men. Persons of education and knowledge. Much like the writer of the Hebrew book of Ecclesiastes, these were people who spent their days reading, engaging other scholars in conversation, and learning one truth after another. The Greeks might have called these folks “oracles.” If you lived in the ancient Middle East, you wouldn’t Google your question about the 1958 Baltimore Colts, or the proper

French word for “adventure”, wonder if the concept of forgiveness existed in Incan society, or ask about the best way to get to Cloverdale, Indiana: you would go ask a wise man. They knew things. They would help you make sense of life.

They were educated, well connected, observant, and probably among the upper echelon of Babylonian or Persian society.

I’d like more details. I’d like more details about the trip West.

The Judean King, hearing about these visitors from the East -we don’t know whether there were three or four or five or six magi- who are asking “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” calls his own wise men and chief priests together. He asks his own circle of educated elites where a new king might be born, and they quote the prophet, Micah (5:2) back to him: *“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”*

Bethlehem was known for three things. First, it was the home town of the great King David. A messianic king in Israel, related by blood to David, would of course come from Bethlehem!

The town was known, secondly, for the baking of bread. In fact, the name in Hebrew meant “house of bread.” People who lived around the town would often smell the fragrance of baking bread. It’s interesting that Jesus would be born in a town known as “the house of bread” because he would oneday tell (John 6:51) the world, *“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”*

The third thing Bethlehem was known for was the raising of sheep which would be used as sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple. Bethelhem is about 25 miles from Jerusalem, and so residents of the smaller town would get used to seeing thousands of sheep being led to Jerusalem to be offered up to God. Jesus is born there. And oneday, over thirty years later, when John the Baptist saw Jesus, John said (John 1:29), *“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* The boy born in Bethlehem would, in his sermons and stories, talk about sheep and the good shepherd and the sheep gate and the good pasture.

When he hears about the prophecy that the ruler over Judah would be born in Bethlehem, according to Micah, Herod secretly calls in the visitors from the East. He tells them that when they find the child, they should come back and tell him where the boy is so that the king can also worship him. There is something in the voice of the king that chills the visitors from the East. They are wise, after all. They are observant, after all. And being well connected to royal types they can recognize blind, naked, unchecked fear and insecurity when they see it, when they hear it, even when it is well disguised.

It wouldn't have taken them long, once arriving in Judea, to hear stories about the paranoia and murderous heart of Herod.

They leave Herod, they make their way to Bethlehem, they worship the child of this carpenter and his young wife. They present their gifts whose symbolism is rich in meaning, and which we don't have the time to explore this morning. They present their gifts to the child, and then they leave.

Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Bible tells us (Matthew 1:12) that *"they left for their own country by another road."*

Yes, I'd like more details about these visitors. I'd like more details about their trip West, their time in Bethlehem with the boy king who was born in a stable or cave, and their time home.

The story of the visitors from the East reminds me of the James Taylor song, Home by Another Way:

*Those magic men the Magi
Some people call them wise
Or Oriental, even kings
Well, anyway, those guys
They visited with Jesus
They sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme
They went home by another way*

*Yes they went home by another way
Home by another way
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
And go home by another way
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home by another way.*

I'd like more details about this story. Still, as we begin our own journey through this new year, here is what I believe God is saying to us:

First, keep your eyes and ears and heart open. The magi noticed the star. The magi paid attention to their dreams. Life is better, deeper, and richer when we pay attention. Maybe that is one of the gifts the pandemic has given us: time and space to pay attention to what God may be saying and where God may be leading us.

Second, go. Respond. Take a risk. Live courageously. Not every journey is a wise adventure, but I am convinced that we can cheat ourselves out of the abundant life by playing it too safe. By staying where we are. By remaining where things are comfortable. So if God nudges, if God calls, if God prompts, if God gives you a star, go. Step out. Respond. Take a risk. Maybe the year ahead will be a season when you and God will share new adventures together and go down roads you never dared travel. We can miss out on great adventures in life because we always make long lists why it isn't the time to follow the star God gives us...the dream God leaves on our doorstep.

Third, remember that to find your way to Jesus is always to end up taking another road home. This is a deep truth that God has laid on my heart as we look ahead, as we consider what it means to be a Jesus community at Auburn First: we are people who have chosen a different road than the rest of the world.

We are different. We operate by a different kind of truth than the rest of the world. One author said that the truth of God will set you free, but it will also make you odd.

I want to challenge you, as a community here at Auburn First, to embrace life by another road. I want you to know that we will be different. I want you to know that we will live by a set of rules and priorities that may strike others as odd and upside-down. I want you to know that people around town and the county may hear about what we are doing, what we are saying, and how we are working to love and welcome all people, and they may be shocked...scandalized. They may say "that's not right!" but we will know Jesus said "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy-laden." All.

We have witnessed, this week in our nation's capitol, extraordinary, tragic events as people driven by fear and by lies stormed our Capitol building, assaulting the democratic process. Many of them were led there, many of them were motivated, by would-be leaders who did not do what Senator Mitt Romney said leaders must have the courage to do: tell the people the truth.

There is a spirit of rage, a temptation to power through violence, an eagerness to insist that our particular tribe or race or group hold power, in our country. And maybe that temptation to demonize the other, to control and demean the other, to insist on our own way even if it means violence, has always been with us.

We have seen one way of doing life, one way of living together, on our TV screens this past week. And what we have seen will not be the way we will live if we say Jesus is Lord. Anger, violence, lies, threats, power through intimidation: these will not be the roads we will take but we will take the road Jesus says leads to life. We will take the road that is love.

Here is what we need to remember: to make our way to Jesus is to decide to go home by another road. It is a decision to live in an upside-down kingdom where the poor in spirit are blessed, where those who mourn will be comforted, where the meek will inherit the earth, where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled, where the merciful will receive mercy, where the pure in heart will see God, and where the peacemakers -who may be seen as troublemakers and un-American by their neighbors- will in fact be called children of God. (Matthew 5:1-ff.)

I want you to embrace this differentness. I want you to follow the star God gives us and travel a very different road than we may see others taking.

Paul, in the 3rd chapter of Ephesians, prays that those early Christians will be strengthened in their inner being with power through God's Spirit, that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith, and that they would be rooted and grounded in love. When the love of Christ takes control of us, Paul observes, we are filled with the fullness of God.

Love takes courage. Love is risky. Love is bold. And love happens best when we put Christ at the center. Love happens best when we are rooted and grounded in his kind of love!

We will take a different road. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, says this:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I have say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat; give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

Much of what Jesus says challenges me. It puzzles me. I am not a pacifist and so I wrestle with some of us, but the one thing I do understand is that Jesus is telling us to live out a kind of love that radical, that is generous, that is shocking in its extravagance. The Jesus road isn’t an “eye for an eye” road but a “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” road. And that will shock your neighbors. That will make you seem different and odd.

The Spirit is calling us to embrace this differentness. The Spirit is calling us to walk home by another road!

Maybe the star God is giving us this year, the star we are to follow, is this: that we would be filled with the fullness of God as we let the love of Christ control us.

Letting that happen takes courage...it may be one of the hardest things you’ll ever do.

And yet letting that happen will bring us a joy that is deeper than we can imagine.

To let that happen is to live by another road...another way.

To let that happen is to be odd...to be strange...to be different.

To let that happen, to be filled with the fullness of God as we let the love of Christ control us, is to be alive.

Go ahead...follow that star...find your way to Jesus...and go back by another road.