

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Finding Another Way Home

Matthew 2.1-12

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Before reading the text: Today is Epiphany – the Feast of the Shining (or the Appearing).

For early believers, and still for many Christians in the east, Epiphany is a bigger celebration than Christmas. Just as we getting everything put away and “getting over” the whole Advent/Christmas celebration, it really is just beginning. Epiphany is the time of real celebration – the real thing. Christmas was but preparation for Epiphany. But that, unfortunately, is foreign to us. I couldn’t help but chuckle as I started the studying process for this sermon. Literally, the first words that I read about the text concerning the Magi were these: “There weren’t three of them, they weren’t kings, they didn’t have camels, and we don’t know they were men.”

(Sojourners, “A Disturbing Gift,” Laurel A. Dykstra) All of our Christmas pageantry - debunked in one sentence. I so vividly remember the Christmas pageants of my childhood days. In no way did they match the bigger than life outdoor drama of our own Tableau, but those Christmas programs of Leesville Southern Methodist Church of the mid-1970’s definitely left their imprint on me. I can still picture my white gown made of an old sheet; the cardboard cut-out angel wings trimmed in silver tinsel; the clothes hanger wire bent and formed to fit the halo for my head – also trimmed in silver tinsel. There would be a Mary and a Joseph, a few shepherds dressed in men’s bathrobes carrying crooked staffs, a head angel accompanied by, at our little church, a *small* multitude of the heavenly host, and if we were lucky and a child had been born in the recent months – a real, live baby was in the manger. A star hung over the scene - having been

sufficiently glued and glittered. And then, down the short aisle of that little country church, would stroll the 3 Wise Men – the “We Three Kings of Orient Are” – with dressed up bathrobes signifying their wealth and large head gear to match their royal heritage – bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby in the manger.

“When we hear the stories of Jesus’ early life, it is almost impossible to look at a text apart from what we think we know about it. For most of us, the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are entwined with one another and their Hebrew scripture roots. In Matthew, the Magi come to a house in Bethlehem; there is no manger, no shepherds, and no heavenly host. Three gifts are named: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In Isaiah 60, gold, frankincense, and camels are listed among the tribute of nations and kings. In Psalm 72, kings bring gifts to Israel’s king and fall down before him.” (Sojourners, “A Disturbing Gift,” Laurel A. Dykstra) We should “recognize that separating the two stories is important lest there be frustrating and futile attempts to interweave and harmonize Luke’s nativity and Matthew’s story of the Magi.” (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year A, Fred Craddock, page 76) So as we read the text today make note of a few things that may not fit with the pageants of our childhood or with what we think we know:

- The Magi follow the star first to Jerusalem – the most logical place to find royalty and all that came with the expectations of a Messiah. It was there that they are pointed to Bethlehem by the chief priests and scribes of the people – they were about 9 miles off course as Bethlehem is about 9 miles south of Jerusalem. The star does continue to guide them.
- It would seem that Mary and Joseph have taken up residence in Bethlehem – they have moved out of the stable and into a house. After the Magi leave, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee to Egypt to live until King Herod dies while Herod initiates the slaughter of the innocents. Upon the death of Herod, the family is told to return to Israel, but in learning that Herod’s son is now in charge, Joseph determines it is still not safe enough there and heads instead to the district of Galilee, and they made their home in a town called

Nazareth. And this story is carefully told, in sequence, in order to fulfill the many prophecies of old.

- The likelihood is that Jesus was about 2 years old when these Wise Guys come to offer their gifts to him – therefore the nativity scenes that have Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, the donkey and the other stable animals, and the 3 Wise Men and Santa Claus all huddled together in the hay is probably not very accurate!
- And finally let me say: let us not get so caught up in the details of guiding stars, and dream interpretations, and prophecies fulfilled that we miss the point of the story. For today, may we let the story stand and learn from its truth – and in so doing, we may just be able to Find Another Way Home.

READ Matthew 2.1-12

When we worked in Montana as chaplains at Big Sky Ski Resort – you know that “before we had children suffering for Jesus stint we did – the majority of the resort employees were young people “trying to find themselves.” Working the ski lifts, using their breaks to ski a few runs, frequenting the local bars, living simply – trying to find their way in that gorgeous expanse of land known as big sky country. We’ve all known about folks going through a “mid-life crisis” – trying to find themselves or reclaim their youth before venturing over into that “over-the-hill” status. They buy sports cars or change their wardrobe or cheat on their spouses. I’ve even heard of some folks completely breaking down and riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle! I’ve recently had some interest in the idea of pilgrimage. In doing some research, I have been amazed at the number of people who are on a quest to find, not just themselves, but to find meaning and purpose and that “*abundance of life*” (John 10.10) of which Jesus spoke over 2000 years ago. Just like the Magi, we are all searching: some for money; some for success; some for power; some for happiness; some for youth; some for solitude; some for company; some for quick fixes; some for respect; some for easy answers found only in the self-help section of every book store – thinking that surely there really are only 7 habits of that will make one highly effective and that will answer all of life’s problems.

The Magi were searching and they headed straight for Jerusalem: a city of money and power and religion – *surely that must be where the star is leading us*, they must have thought. That’s how most folks think, anyway. And not until they get there – fully expecting to find what they have been looking for – do they realize that they are about 9 miles north of their target. Their journey is not over. They did not find what they were looking for in the most obvious place. And so they trudge on. I can’t help but wonder what they talked about for those 9 miles – How could they have missed their mark? What kind of end will they find in *Bethlehem* of all places? Will this be another dead-end? And yet the star really starts to shine bright now that they have left behind their misperceptions and misconceptions. Now that they are refocused, the light shines a little brighter – a little clearer. And then they arrive at the house and find all that they have been looking for and they are *overwhelmed with joy*.

And when it is time to go home, they don’t head north to Jerusalem first. They found another way home. And as I imagined this scene, I had a little aha. Perhaps the light from that star shined brighter – or at least bright enough – for the journey home. We always picture the Magi following that star to Jesus. But in reading the text closely, they really don’t seem to start following the star closely until they miss their mark in Jerusalem. And then upon finding the star it seems to light their way home – another way home.

I’m convinced most of the folks we know are searching – some fairly desperately. Perhaps even you. Some have made their way to Jerusalem and have gotten stuck there – in the power or in the money or maybe even in the religion. Some have made it past there and are on the 9 mile journey toward the south – it’s probably the longest part of the trek. Some have arrived at the place where the star has stopped and they never want to leave. But I am convinced

that one lesson from this Epiphany text – the Feast of the Shining – is that the light that we have found is bright enough to find another way home.

I can't be the only one that finds that good news. We enter a new year. We find ourselves drawn here – to community – to life within the Body of Christ. But it has for many become routine. We come here, and then we go home by the same route. The quickest, the shortest way – the way with less traffic! And no, we don't just find God at church. In all the many places we find God and see God and hear God – in all the many people that we see Jesus at work – in all the many times that we experience the presence of God - - - we still have a tendency to go home by the same way. The lesson from Epiphany is that upon encountering Jesus, we are to find another way home. I would bet that as the Magi searched, they were focused and driven – both good things. But upon his Appearing, they couldn't go home by the same road they had traveled to get there. And I imagine that the star that got them there illumined their new way home and allowed them to see what all was happening in life's journey and not just in the destination. Perhaps they let go of all that was driving them to Jerusalem. Surely, on the way home, they noticed the wildflowers. Surely, on the way home, they heard the chirping of birds. Surely, on the way home, they took the time to speak to the folks they passed along the way. Surely, on the way home, they took the time to stop and help those in need. Surely, on the way home, they enjoyed each other's company like never before. Surely, on the way home, they counted their blessings. Surely, on the way home, they dipped their feet into creeks. Surely, on the way home, they laughed a little more, and maybe even skipped a step or two. Surely, on the way home, they prayed. Surely, on the way home, they relived their tale over and over – trying to learn lessons from their pilgrimage. Surely, on the way home, they kept a keen eye out for those that were being mistreated, and they took the time to speak and act on their behalf. Surely, on the way

home, they fought for justice. Surely, on the way home, they were changed people. Surely, on the way home, they stopped to worship God who had offered a brighter path home.

I want to offer a suggestion to you today. Go home from this place today by another way. Literally. Don't take the same old path. We live our lives in such a way that we could auto-pilot our car in a few minutes and it would know the way home. And we make that journey and cease to notice life that is all around us. Because truth be known, once we arrived here today, many of us, mentally, are on to the next thing. So today, travel home by another way. And today, pay attention to the beauty. Pay attention to the needs. We are such creatures of habit that we don't pay attention to life as we pass through it. I think Epiphany means more than the Appearing or the Shining – it means Finding Another Way Home. I believe those Magi were changed, and we need to heed their example. This morning on NPR, Sister Helen Prejean opened her essay *This I Believe* with these words: "I watch what I do to know what I believe." I believe that is true for our worship and service. In action and in contemplation. In prayer and in deed. If the story had the Magi leaving Bethlehem and headed north to Jerusalem, we would have no faith story to tell. But I am convinced that the light of that star guided them home more than it guided them to Bethlehem. May it be so for us as well.