

## Taking a Different Road

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Matthew 2: 1-12

I can still see it. I have a very clear picture in my mind. It's this beautiful green, level expanse that sits just outside what is still the "little" town of Bethlehem. They call it the "shepherds' field." No doubt, at least in part, because tourists from a long time back always wanted to know where the shepherds would have been living in the fields outside of Bethlehem. To see it is just perfect. And of course, our minds have been trained by all the Christmas pageants we've ever seen or been part of. So, eventually standing there looking out over the "shepherds field" we also see in our mind's eye elaborately dressed magi, "wise men" riding their camels across the same fields.

Of course, part of the problem with that is that all of our pageants have made it into one story. When, in fact, it's two different stories, of course, told by two entirely different Gospel writers, Luke and Matthew writing ten to fifteen years apart. Luke has the story of the shepherds in the fields. It's Matthew, of course, from today's lesson that has the story of the "wise men" from the east, and no mention of camels by the way. Matthew and Luke told different stories because each one was trying in their own way to say something about how they understood the significance of Christ, and more importantly what it means to follow him.

That's the only reason why any of the Gospel writers bothered to write anything at all. They weren't, you know, trying to record facts for history's sake. These are evangelical documents! They are preaching documents, expanded sermons, really, written for the purpose of bringing a Word of God to help their readers and hearers become better *followers* of Christ! They were written to help create a people who could be faithful to Christ as they lived their lives.

Well, in Matthew's story the magi from the east have a revelation to go on, but it, by itself is not enough. Because, they still end up on a conventional route. As Matthew tells it, they were astrologers of some sort. You know, like in your local newspaper: Sagittarius, and Capricorn, and Pisces and all of that. They watched the skies for what they could tell them about what was happening or soon to happen in the world. For the most part, we think of that as hocus pocus nonsense, but they believed in it enough that they set out on a long journey. They interpreted this new star they found in the sky to mean a new king had been born in a country to the west of them, which led them, of course, to Jerusalem. Because, where else do you look for kings and rulers, than in capital cities, you know, centers of political power?

So, like I said, they have this revelation to go on, but by itself it's not enough! They end up on a completely conventional route and it puts them in the wrong place! They need to be in an obscure, backwater town called Bethlehem, not Jerusalem. And when King Herod hears that they're in Jerusalem and *why* they're there, he freaks. But, he knows what to do. He calls together the chief priests and the scribes to find out where the Messiah is to be born, because they're the ones who know the Scriptures. See, it takes both doesn't it? It takes the community that knows how to interpret the Scriptures that record all the hopes and dreams and interactions of God with a particular people. But, it also takes being open to God's leading in all kinds of ways in your life and in creation.

It also takes a revelation. That's what the chief priests and the scribes were apparently missing. They knew the scriptures backwards and forwards, but they weren't open to how God was moving in their hearts and in the world, so they missed it. They weren't open to things around them that might have suggested that the Messiah, the Holy One, was already in their midst. It takes both. I mean, look we've been trained by this story, and by so many like it in the Gospel, and yet we still try to find and make our "home" by all the conventional means and in all the

conventional places don't we? We still look for security and peace in life and in our world through things like: nation, politics, education, power, fame, money. Are we actively seeking to know what it might mean to follow Christ? How much real studying of the Scriptures with the community of faith are we doing, much less studying them with an eye and a heart open to seeing and hearing an alive Word of God for us and our lives and our world? And do we carry that open eye and heart around with us hoping and expecting to see and hear a Word from God in countless other places in each other and around us in the world?

This story in Matthew offers us a clue even in the historical obscurity of just who these Magi refer to. Some think they were a caste of priests from Persia. Others think their ancestry is from the Kurds, a people who even today have no politically recognized homeland. But, either way, they come from all places, Iran, or perhaps Iraq. These, who with open hearts set out on a journey and end up kneeling before and in their *own* way offering their lives to Christ. It was an unconventional story then, but maybe even more so now, for us. Would we be willing to take our cue from some obscure Muslims from Iran, who in their way are searching for the Holy One among us?

We've been raised on this story and yet of much more interest to us are our national politics. We'll listen to endless radio and television pundits and journalists go on and on. And though other types of legislation may struggle, in the end, military spending will always get funded. It says something about where we look for security and peace, where we look for "home," doesn't it? And, how many different tabloids are there at our grocery store checkout lines? And, even if I shake my head about them, still my eyes always scan their headlines. We are endlessly fascinated with the rich and powerful and famous. It says something about where we think security and peace and "home" are to be found, doesn't it? We've been trained by this story and so many others in the Gospels, and yet we still try to find answers in all the conventional places.

But, friends this story in Matthew is about offering your life to Christ. And says Matthew, to offer your life to Christ means not going back to Herod! Did you catch that? It means not going back to Herod! It means taking a *different* way "home!" Theologian James Alison has pointed out the significance of the gifts the Magi offer to Christ. He says: "With each gift we are offered a way to shift the weight of our heart in an unaccustomed direction. When the Magi offer him gold, which indicates a king, we are invited to lessen the tribute we offer to the power structures to which we belong and on which we depend; when they offer him frankincense, which indicates a priest, we are invited to tiptoe out from under the delusions of our sacred canopies, to be drawn into the jagged-edged sacrifice of presence that this Priest will carry out;" (you know, realizing that our faith isn't about some privileged place with God, but about serving others wherever *their* need is) "and when they offer him myrrh, which indicates a prophet's death, the Magi invite our hearts to lighten as death loses its hold over our drives and desires."

So, we are called by Christ, not to go back to Herod. That doesn't mean God doesn't still use Herod to work for God's purposes, just as Herod was used here in this story. It just means we can no longer conflate or confuse the agenda of Herod with the agenda of God. Like the magi, we need to go "home" a *different* way. Stanley Hauerwas has written, "The Kingdom is a journey, another road, whereby followers of Jesus may well find that they are strangers even when they are 'at home.'" Friends, as followers of Jesus, we as individuals and as a church are called to take the road of relative obscurity, sometimes even of smallness, or weakness, because the "road home" which is Jesus is the road of love and service, and giving our selves and our lives away. And the fact is, for the most part, you don't get rich or famous or powerful that way. But, you do get home. And the thing is, anybody, no matter who they are, or what they've done, and any size church, even if it's a church of only six members can answer this call. In fact, having less to lose, they may be able to answer it better.

Love and service and giving our selves and our lives away. That's what it means to follow Christ. And, unlike all the roads that brought us here, and that we'll probably travel again when we leave, this road, if we'll take it, this *different road* will lead us to our true "home" in God. I invite you to come to this table and kneel before him again in thanks and in devotion. In offering himself, his body, his life to become your life, once again in this meal he offers you home. Come and take and eat, and at the beginning of this new year, begin that journey on the different "road" that is Christ, again.

Amen.