



Sermons from

“By Another Road”

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Celebration of the Epiphany

Matthew 2: 1-12

This morning we celebrate Epiphany. Generally speaking, an epiphany is an appearance, a manifestation of a divine being, a revealing scene or moment that gives us insight into the divine. More generally, we often think of epiphanies as those times a light bulb goes on in our heads, a “Eureka! I’ve got it!” moment, a time when in our lives we can say “Ah, now I see” as God works all things for good in our lives.

In the church Epiphany is both a festival day and a season. The exact day is January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas. The season runs from January 6th until Ash Wednesday. The specific day of Epiphany is the recognition of the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in persons of the Wise Men. Since that time, the season of Epiphany has allowed those who seek to follow Christ a time to rejoice in his presence. It is a time to find out what difference faith in Christ can mean.

Central to our understanding of Epiphany are those men variously called magi pronounced with long a, or magi pronounced with a short a, and Wise Men. In fact, they were both. They were men of magic in the sense they were thought to have powers of the occult because they were astrologers. This in turn led them to be fascinated by that particular star that appeared at the time of the birth of Jesus.

They also were wise men. Some people would say they were wise men because they asked for directions once they got in the vicinity of where they were trying to go. Imagine that, three men asking for directions! But beyond that, they were wise men because they knew which king to worship.

The biblical account is straight-forward. Just as shepherds and other such folks in the neighborhood of Bethlehem were drawn by the star to come and see what it signified, so too the star-oriented men from afar thought the same bright star was worth following.

Unforeseen things can happen on road trips. In this case, the travelers had an audience with the king of the land, King Herod. Arriving at the crossroads settlement of Jerusalem, a scant five miles from Bethlehem where the star was most prominent, the star men no doubt had conversations with several locals. This in turn must have led to some buzz that got to King Herod, that there were exotic travelers looking for a king, and his name was not Herod.

Here is where the scepter of evil enters the account. Here is precisely why the world needs a heavenly king and savior. Earthly king Herod’s fear, lust for power and paranoia all come to full flower as he calls the Wise Men to his palace. He implores them to find this king under the guise that he too might worship him. In reality, we know that Herod wants no part of any other possible king anywhere around him and will go to any measures to have him killed.

Undeterred by Herod from their mission, the Wise Men continued on to Bethlehem. There at the manger we know they were overwhelmed with joy at what they saw and felt. They were, in their own way, star-struck by the main characters at the manger, the baby and his mother. And they acted

accordingly, unstrapping from their road-weary camels trunks full of treasures, placing the riches before the true king of the world, the King of kings, God's own child.

This year, just as the season of Christmas is ending, what with the decorations now slated to come down in the church and I know in our home this afternoon, and with children returning to school this week, so too the manger scene ended for the Wise Men. Their mission of learning why the star had shown so brightly had been accomplished. But...however...hooray...bless those wise men...and this is the meaning of Epiphany for us if this biblical account is to have any life-changing impact on us today... we hear this ending, which is really a beginning for all who have ears to hear. Gospel writer Matthew recounts: "...*having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*"

Today we celebrate God's epiphany, God's revelation, God's manifestation, to us all...to the suspecting and the unsuspecting. The season of Epiphany is first all about discerning and then taking alternate routes to the future. Some of our life's "by another road" are imposed upon us. Issues surrounding family, health and vocation that intervene turn our lives around on a dime. We can, as a classic song tells us, be "riding on the freeway of love in a pink Cadillac" and suddenly find ourselves in a ditch. Medical tests that come back positive become negative in our lives. For some, planned for vocations at the time of graduation from high school, and even college and graduate school, are left behind and we travel another road from the one we envisioned.

My wife Anne and I have a treasured friend named Lee. We met when Anne was a new teacher and I was at seminary, and during the intervening years we have shared both joys and sorrows with her and, later, with her husband Tom.

Lee was the youngest child of a family with definite and rigid expectations. The children would go to certain colleges, live on the Eastern seaboard, make certain kinds of friends and vacation in certain places. In turn, they would have children who would go and do likewise.

Lee at first conformed to many of the family conventions. To this day she treasures many of them. But she and Tom chose to live far from the East Coast, first in Central America, next in the Far East and then for a long time in the desert of California. As they broke away from rigid expectations, Lee and Tom clung close to each other and to the words of beloved poet Robert Frost from his poem "The Road Not Taken." Some of you know it begins this way:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim...*

Then it ends like this:

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,*

And that has made all the difference.

For Lee, the poignancy of those words gained heightened intensity when Tom was stricken with multiple myeloma in his early fifties and died two years later. They had traveled life by another road. They did so valiantly, with love and courage and humility and with the sure knowledge that they had traveled the road God had paved for them.

Their traveling these other roads, roads that were the right ones for them, gave Lee a strength I have seldom seen in any situation. Standing by Tom's open grave on a chilly yet sunshine-filled day in December, Lee recited Frost's poem in its entirety. By doing so, Lee assured all of us that the road they had taken—another road than the one that others had prescribed for them or that they had imagined when they took their wedding vows--had indeed made all the difference in their lives.

The take away from any Epiphany celebration is not that we will inevitably find ourselves on roads other than the ones we envision at different times of our lives. We should already know that. Rather, Epiphany has meaning when we discern what God is saying to us today--whether through dreams or restlessness in our souls for something more than we now feel, or through holy agents, likely and unlikely, giving us holy nudges into the future.

Coming at the beginning of the new year as it does, Epiphany challenges us to experience holiness. To be sure, we will find some of the roads familiar, others unfamiliar. Often it is the familiar that gives us confidence to travel the unfamiliar with newfound faith.

So, come today to the Lord's Table. Partake of the familiar—the bread of life and the cup of salvation. Come, prepare for the unexpected. Be willing to travel by another road than the one you think you want to or have scripted for yourself. Listen for God. Listen to God.

It will make all the difference.

Amen.

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