

Going Home by another Route  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Sermon by Joanne Gallardo  
January 7, 2018

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

*"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.'" (NRSV)*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Christmas is not over. Not yet, anyway. This Sunday is Epiphany, the day we celebrate the 3 Magi, or wise men, or kings, who came to Bethlehem because they heard the king of the Jews had been born. The Magi are rather central to the story, because they've made such an impression on commercialized Christmas. They appear on Christmas cards, there are songs about them, we've named them... It should be noted that in our text it never says that there were 3 Magi, we just assume that because they have gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and somewhere in our Christian tradition, we really wanted each person to have a gift of their very own to give Jesus. It should also be noted that in our text it was never stated that these men were kings, we assume this from Psalm 72:11, where it says "May all kings bow down before him." Some Christian traditions say there were 12 Magi.

Our nativity scenes are quite inaccurate, as the adoration of the shepherds, the Magi, the animals, and the stable all sort of happen together in what comes across as a rather crazy scene of rather busy looking barnyard. Our text mentions a house specifically when referring to the Magi's visit, it

also never gives us a timetable of the visit. It's very likely the Magi's visit happened up to 2 years later, because when Herod catches wind of what happened in Bethlehem, he orders that all male children 2 years and younger be killed, hoping to exterminate the boy that would surely lead to a Jewish uprising.

Lots could be said about the origin of the Magi, speculation about what happened to them when they went home "by another route," and I will focus on that in a minute, but what I want to focus on now is this journey. What on earth possessed 3, or 4, or 12 men, to take a trip from what is literally translated from the Greek "where the Sun rises," so, East, all the way to Bethlehem, where a star has led them, to some house, to see a baby? For being "wise" men this journey had to seem pretty foolish, maybe even rash. What drove them was their need to see for themselves this fulfillment of prophecy, this unlikely event happening in a place they may have never visited.

When one starts out on a journey, it's customary, but not necessary, to have a destination. This may be a trip to the grocery store, or to our vacation destination, or it's a different type of journey and our destination is graduating with a degree, or having a child, or getting a job. Maybe our journey is a journey to retirement, or it's just getting out of bed in the morning. I have had many journeys in my life. Many from my younger years involved education. I wanted to graduate from high school, then college, then seminary, and these were all journeys that happened one right after the other. Then after that, I was at a loss, what journey was I on? More education? Bigger, better job? Marriage and family? I quickly found there were a lot of societal pressures telling me what type of journey *others* thought I should be on, but I really had to discover what path I was on myself. Sometimes the journey was to feel more hopeful, to be happy, and that involved journeys to get out of bed in the morning. Other times it was job related. But the primary journey that seemed the most important was that journey between me and God. Where was God leading me? What theological or spiritual mile markers was I looking for? How would I know when I arrived? I don't know the answers to that, but with each passing year I get a little better in knowing what I'm looking for. Not unlike the Magi, I too am looking for that baby in that house out in the middle of nowhere, hoping to see for myself "God with us."

But I also want to focus on our journey, here at Berkey. What has our journey been like? Where is our destination?

Later this month, Dan will preach about our history, and where we've been. I won't get into all that. I'm still getting to know you all, and I've only been with you a few months now. But as the Magi likely went on a journey that was 2 years in the making, what has happened at Berkey in the last 2 years of our journey? A lot has been loaded onto the second half of those 2 years. Kansas City recently happened and all sorts of upheaval started to unravel in the larger denomination, Indiana Michigan conference has been ever changing, Marilyn left very suddenly, Dan started pastoring half time, I came in August, Paula came and started the Deep Listening process and now Paula is getting ready to leave, Bob and Mag Richer Smith are here with us for a while, a search committee has been formed to find another pastor. We may be suffering from ecclesial and organizational whiplash.

A lot has certainly happened for Berkeley. But where do you fit into that? Where does your story, or your journey, fit into this narrative of whiplash, loss, and transition? What losses have you sustained? This time of year, we are tempted to think about all the gains. To acknowledge our loss is quite countercultural. With the New Year, we are tempted to “think forward” and forget what has gone wrong or not well, and to consider the coming year a clean slate. While there’s nothing wrong with that mentality to an extent, I think it does a great disservice to our own betterment, learning, and even our faith to not sit with and take account of failures and losses. We lose so much emotional strength when we don’t take the time to sit and feel our feelings concerning what we no longer have. Other cultures are great at this, allowing people in their community to “feel.” Many other cultures, my own included, encourage us to “suck it up,” “toughen up” and move on.

And I want to name what we may be feeling ourselves as individuals. We may be tired, tired of all the transitions, of all the different preachers. We may be feeling unanchored, unsettled. Or maybe we’re just really unsure, unsure of new people coming in, whether or not we will stand the test of time or fit in. We may be eager to have conversations, to get things straightened out, to figure out where we stand. Or maybe we’re just sad. Sad that Marilyn had to leave, sad that Dan has gone to half time, sad that Paula will soon leave, maybe even sad that I was hired, sad for all the losses we’ve faced in the last year. Where are we going and what are we doing?

I want us to go back to the Magi for a moment and think about how their journey might be similar to our own. This journey, in particular, is long. It’s unsettling. They have no road map for where they’re going, they’ve never done this before. Partway through their journey they see a star that sits over the house where Jesus dwells, an act of grace in what has likely been a drawn out, confusing journey. Travelling is tough. And all they had was a prophecy to go on, their own faith that this baby was worthy of their worship and adoration. They trusted that this baby would change the world.

The success of the Magi on their journey was the star. The star that helped them arrive at their destination, and achieve their goal, which was the worship and adoration of the baby Messiah. This is something we as a congregation know. We know how to worship. We know how to encounter the holy. We have our star. And we find it to be our guide in seeking to be followers of Jesus and worshippers of God.

Our challenge is the means of getting there, and going back home. When the Magi heard of King Herod’s rage over the potential uprising of the Jews, the Magi realized that they could not go back the way they came. They had to go home by another route.

We also cannot go back the way we came. Too much has changed. We’ve changed. The denomination has changed. Our administration has changed, as much as we are loathe to admit that sometimes our political climate shapes the way we do church, for better or for worse.

In a certain light, this is awful. But just as there is a shadow side for every situation that seems bleak, there is also hope, and opportunity. We cannot go home by the same way we came. We have to go home by another route. In essence, we’re given a chance to do it over. We are also not given

the option of comfort or even safety. What can losing these luxuries do for us as a community of faith?

I think we have to lose several things. First of all, you lose pretence. Niceties and manners go out the door when you're not taking a route you know. You focus on what matters, your route (obviously), those who are with you, and those in your life who matter most. You lose inhibitions. You say what you mean, you ask important questions, and let those around you know honestly what you're feeling. And I think we as a congregation are ready for this. We know each other, we trust each other, and we're ready.

So are we prepared to go back by another route? We've seen and encountered Jesus, we are at the end of our Christmas journey. We've sustained loss, and it's been long, arduous, painful, and joyful, and hopeful. It's time for us to go home.

Today we have a service of anointing. Anointing has been done for many situations, there are services of anointing for the sick, for those who are about to take on a role, or a situation where a person is set apart. I don't know where you find yourself today, but I invite you to search within yourself and ask yourself, what are you looking for? Are you needing to name your loss? Are you ready to be set apart for this journey home? Do you need healing? Are you unsettled and in need of redirection? Whatever your reason, Dan, Mag, Bob, and I are here to anoint you and care for you as you make your journey home.

We invite those who wish to be anointed to come up the main rows, and return to your seats by the outside rows. We will anoint you on your forehead but if you're not comfortable with that, you can reach out your arm and we can anoint you on the back of your hand.

Greg will lead us in singing during this time.