

January 8, 2017
Mathew 2:1-12
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“Another Way”

This is one of my favorite Sundays of the year: the feast of the Epiphany when we celebrate the wise men coming to worship the baby Jesus. We get to sing a few more carols, I get to pull out all these awesome gold, silver and bronze ornaments, for the Fellowship time, Lanette Bryant has made not one, not two, but three cakes for us. There is a gold coin baked into each one, and whoever finds it -- chew carefully -- will be crowned king or queen for a day. Jenny Cooper has created a special gift for these kings or queens from her aromatherapy business. Gold stars, fabulous gifts, great decorations -- there's just so much stuff to like about Epiphany.

And that, my friends, can be a problem if we're not careful. Because with all this action going on -- wise men coming from the East to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, color and pageantry and presents, treasures and dreams and stars -- we can forget the whole point of the story. We can forget the baby. And when we forget the baby, bad things happen. I invite you to watch this short video with me: [Mix -- baby on top of car] You may be relieved to hear that there was not an actual baby in that car seat: this video was created as a prank to see how people would react to someone forgetting the baby. If there had been an infant in that car seat, I would hope that someone would have stopped the driver immediately, rather than standing and filming him driving around a parking lot. There are however, documented cases of parents driving away with an infant in a car seat on top of their car, and I know from personal and family experience that sometimes there is just so much stuff to get together to get from one place to another with little kids, that sometimes the baby is the last thing that gets scooped up on the way out the door or when we're piling into the car.

So as we're pulling into January 2017 and looking back at Christmas in the rear view mirror, my advice to you is "Don't forget the baby!" The birth of Jesus marks the beginning of a long journey -- many intersecting journeys, actually. Mary's journey across the Galilean hills to see her cousin Elizabeth and share their pregnancies together; Joseph and Mary's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem; these star-gazers from the East -- we're not sure where, but it's a long way away -- who come to Herod's court in Jerusalem; an encounter which causes the Holy Family to flee to Egypt. None of these journeys happened by automobile, and the flight to Egypt was not on an airplane, so there were no car seats involved -- but in the biblical account, nobody forgets the baby. The baby is the reason for all this commotion.

The gospel writer Matthew certainly doesn't forget the baby, or the reason for all this moving around. Three times in these 12 verses we heard Ted read today, Matthew uses a Greek verb that gets translated as "Pay him homage" or "worship him." The wise men travel to Jerusalem and ask Herod where the king is so they can worship him. Herod says, "Let me know when you find him, because I want to worship him, too!" Herod is lying, but Matthew uses that same verb. When the wise men actually get to the place where the child is, they are overwhelmed with joy and they kneel down and worship him -- before they even give him those fabulous and not really kid-friendly gifts. Matthew's account reminds us not to forget the baby. The baby may not yet have grown into the Messiah who will call fisherman and tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners like you and me to follow him on the journey of discipleship, but this is no ordinary baby. This baby is worthy of our worship. This baby is Emmanuel, God With Us, and if we forget the baby, any journey we make is pointless, and maybe even dangerous.

There is a phrase at the very end of Matthew's account of the wise men which I find to be poignant and potentially painful, and especially relevant for us today. Verse 12 says, "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." These wise men have changed their allegiance from Herod to this new infant king. They have been overwhelmed with joy and brought to their knees in worship. Their eyes and their hearts have been opened so that God could reveal the meaning of the star which

guided their way. And now they have to go home to their own country. And they can't go back the way they came. They have to go another way.

I believe that going home another way is a wonderful metaphor for what happens after we encounter Jesus; after God's purposes have been revealed to us -- even though that revelation is usually imperfect and incomplete. This is not only my journey of being called into Christian ministry, or the journey which has brought you here, or the journey which we are traveling together at Creekside. This is a universal journey which humans have grappled with as long as there have been humans. It is the journey of maturity: of growing up and leaving home and being changed and realizing that you will never be able to go back the same way. This is initiation into adulthood; it's as epic as a warrior's vision quest and as ordinary as a young woman leaving home to go to college. These are both journeys of self-discovery and maturity. Mythologist Joseph Campbell called it The Hero's Journey, and it is literally the stuff of legend. Cultures from all over the world have told this story in endless variation. A version that many of us are familiar with is the Star Wars movie -- especially the original one where Luke Skywalker encounters Obi Wan Kenobi and begins a journey which changes the course of his life.

The Church of the Brethren has picked up on this theme with its tagline, Church of the Brethren: Another way of living. That's the title of materials our denomination produces to introduce people to our flavor of the Christian journey of discipleship. It assumes that following Jesus will reveal things to us about ourselves and about our world which will transform us, and cause us continue our journey another way. If you're a long-time church goer like I am, you may have stopped thinking of Christianity as anything heroic. Mostly, it's just work: I just hope nobody expects me to do too much or give any more money or sit in a different seat on Sunday morning. I'm certainly not doing anything another way. I mean, this way is working, right? Well, maybe it isn't not working that great, but I've done it this way a long time, it's familiar, and I really don't want to try another way. I get that. I get stuck in my own way of doing things.

So it's good for me to be reminded that there are places in our world where practicing Christianity is still an act of heroism. And it's no

coincidence that these are places where the church is growing. The place we have heard about the most through the Church of the Brethren is Nigeria, where Christians have been persecuted and had to flee their homes churches have been destroyed, and many people do not have any choice but to go home another way. Some no longer have homes to return to, and have begun the long hard work of rebuilding houses and businesses and communities and churches. Some of the most courageous have made the choice to witness to peace, to be reconciled with their neighbors, to let go of hatred and proclaim that they are followers of the Prince of Peace. They didn't choose this journey, they were forced to go, but when they ran from their homes in the middle of the night, they did not forget the baby. Although our sisters and brothers in Nigeria may act in ways that we consider heroic, it is not their power but the power of God that is at work. When we allow that power of God and our faith in Jesus Christ to be revealed in our lives, it transforms us and overwhelms us with joy and takes us to our knees in worship.

It's worth mentioning another fact about the wise men which may be relevant to our journey today: they were outsiders. Not just from outside of Palestine and Roman-occupied territories, but from outside of Judaism. They weren't even part of the chosen people. Some of the chosen people had lost their way--Jews like Herod, who had completely bought in to the Roman political system and would have been happy to have any child slaughtered who got in his way. Insiders can get so blinded by maintaining our own positions and maintaining things as they are that we can miss the dreams and stars that are revealed to those we consider outsiders.

Epiphany is the beginning of a journey which will change us if we have the courage to let it. It begins with looking outward and being willing to go someplace unfamiliar. Although we each have gifts to offer, the first and most important one is the desire to worship the king. Not just any king, but this king, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God With Us, the fulfillment of the promise to all people. That's just the beginning. The most difficult part of the journey begins when Christmas is over and we can no longer see the star and we turn our backs on Bethlehem and have to go home another way. We'll be talking -- at least I'll be talking, I hope you will be, too -- about this journey in the coming weeks. I'd encourage you to think about and

talk about your own journey with me or with other members of your family and church family. When did you leave home? Have you left home? Was it your choice, or did something make you leave? What does it mean, or what has it meant to go home another way?

Here are some words of wisdom that I take from Matthew's story of the wise men, and I invite you to consider these for your own journey. Look out and look up; especially when it's dark. Open your eyes and open your heart to what God has to reveal. Be overwhelmed with joy. Listen to outsiders. Trust God. Don't forget the baby. Amen.