



## “Home by Another Way”

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*Luke 2:1-12*

Once upon a time there were three very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries, minding their own business, when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of them. The star was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were wise enough to know it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.

They were all glad for a reason to get out of town, which was clearly where the star was calling them: out away from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns. And so they set out, one by one, believing that he was the only one with a star in his eye, until they all ran into one another on the road to Jerusalem. From a distance, each thought the other to be a mirage at first, a twinkling reflection mad of vapor and heat. But as they drew near to one another, they saw the star they had in common—like a tattoo or a secret handshake—something that made them brothers before they spoke. They all believed that the star was leading them to Jerusalem. This made perfect sense, because they had every reason to believe they were on their way to meet a king.

The wise men met with a grumbling, ruffled Herod and realized that the star in their eyes was not bright in Herod’s palace. So, they went back out into the night air where the star illuminated their path to the real king. They followed the star right to the doorway of a one-room house in Bethlehem. It was a perfectly nice place, modest but well built—though not the kind of place where they had expected to find a king. A dog was sniffing the woodpile under the eaves in hopes of a mouse. Someone was practicing the lute next door, going over the same notes again and again. The smell of dinner was still in the air—wheat cakes cooked on a griddle greased with sheep’s fat, lentils with lots of garlic, and rice.

The place looked so simple, they might never have chosen it themselves. But since the star had chosen it for them, they knocked. When the door opened, the couple standing behind it almost died in fright. Not that the wise men noticed. With their arms full of gifts, they crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters and snagging their robes on the rough furniture. All they could see was the baby, who was not afraid and whose right eye shone with the same star they had seen before they ever left home.

It was him, then, whoever he was. They did not have a clue, but they knew what to do. They got on their knees and bowed their heads. Then they gave him the things they had brought for him—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—all the wrong things, they could see now, things he had no use for. They should have brought him goat’s milk, a warm blanket, something shiny to hang over

his crib. But how could they have guessed? The child's parents were gracious. They thanked the strangers for their expensive gifts and held them up for the baby to see.

In the morning on the next day, after the wise men woke, they could not find their stars anywhere. They searched each other's eyes, but the stars were gone. Frantically they looked in all the corners and under the chairs. The baby's mother even shook out his blankets, but still, no stars. Soon the wise men calmed down and said, "Never mind, we do not need them anymore." They had found what they were looking for, something they could not lose. As much as they hated to, they added, they had better be on their way.

They would not be going back through Jerusalem, they said. All three of them had woken from the same identical dream, warning them to steer clear of the city. If anyone in Jerusalem knew anything at all, they would be here instead of there. Besides, none of the wise men's old maps worked anymore. They would have to find a new way home.

So the wise men picked up their packs, which were lighter than before. Then they lined up in front of the baby, to thank him for the gifts he had given them. "What in the world are you talking about?" the baby's mother said, laughing. "For the scent and weight and skin of a baby," said the first wise man. "For this home and the love here," said the second wise man. "For a really great story," said the third wise man. Then the wise men walked outside, stretched, kissed the baby good-bye, and went home by another way.

I love this retelling of the familiar story of the magi as written by pastor, professor, and author Barbara Brown Taylor. Her children's book is called, "Home by Another Way" because the biblical story ends saying that the magi went home by another route. That phrase, "home by another way," jumps out at me because I don't feel at home in our world most days. Our lives seem very scattered and the feeling of safety and comfort, of home, feels like it is changing. I don't know about you, but I find myself journeying with God and moving through life most days by an alternate way, pushed in an unexpected direction by circumstances out of my control. Things are changing in our world and we need to, now more than ever, find our home not in King Herod but in King Jesus. We need to find our home not in an expensive palace but in a cramped one room house filled with love. We need to find our home not on the pious road to Jerusalem but journeying on the humble road to Emmaus where Jesus shows up to us in our grief and in our pain. The road home looks different these days.

And the road home looked different for the wise men in Matthew's day. You see, the Jewish people lived under Roman occupation, with Herod the Great ruling Galilee and all of Judea. Herod was a mean and ruthless ruler who supported Rome above anything else, even to the point of suppressing his own people's rebellion against the Empire. And because Herod loved Rome so much, the Roman senate appointed him King of the Jews in about 40 BCE. Herod rebuilt the Temple as a sign of his power and fame and his control over the Jewish people.

And so, it is easy to see why Jerusalem was the first stop for the magi. They traveled to find the King of the Jews and, according to society, Herod was that person. But something told those travelers from the East that this was not the king they were looking for. Maybe they initially approached Herod, perhaps to test out how this king would respond to the idea that a rival, a

future, better king being born right under his nose. Of course, we know that Herod had an evil plan to find the new king and kill him, but the wise men didn't know about this terrible plot.

And then, when the magi found the baby, they offered him expensive and rather symbolic gifts. Most scholars see the gifts as revealing the nature of the newborn Christ; gold was royalty, frankincense was a scent for worship, and myrrh was a balm used in anointing the dead. If we don't assume the supernatural and symbolic meaning, then really the gifts are useless. I mean, what would a baby need with such finery. I'm sure the holy family could've used a warm casserole or diapers or new onesies. These foreign travelers offered their best, their all, their allegiance to the one who would rule differently than Herod, to the one who would rule from a place of humbleness, love, and inclusion. The established Roman king was not the one who would save the people, it was God incarnate. Now that is an epiphany, that is a manifestation of a new way of being in and loving the world. The wise men would need to find a new way home because the world had a new savior.

So, I think "going home by another road" captures the essence and the spirituality of Epiphany. Bruce Epperly, a theologian and author, agrees that "Epiphany is about the unexpected: unexpected joys and synchronicities and unexpected challenges and tragedies. Epiphany is filled with unexpected revelations that change our minds and ways." Eventually, all of us go home by another route, we walk roads we never expected to travel, whether these involve changes in employment, health, relationships, or economic status. Epperly says, "When life forces us from the familiar highway onto an uncharted path, we are challenged to experience holiness as we travel on another road. The path is seldom easy, but within the real limitations of life, we may discover unexpected possibilities for vocation, mission, and transformation."

As I see the star in my own right eye this Epiphany Sunday, I see that God is calling us as Christians in 2019 to travel a different road. The road we've been traveling has led us to the tyrant king Herod rather than the peace of the Christ-child. Let's make sure we have the holy spark, the divine star in our eyes as we visit the baby Jesus. Because how are we going to visit the baby when he's been separated from his parents at the border? How are we going to visit the baby when he is starving on the street? How are we going to visit the baby when we don't love him as our own? How are we going to visit the baby when we have shut and locked our doors and shut and locked our hearts? How are we going to visit the baby when we seem to be taking the wrong road?

Celtic pilgrims often went out to sea in small, round wicker boats, sailing into the unknown without a rudder. They trusted that God would guide them to their "place of resurrection." They believed that even in the midst of the winds and waves, the storms and the seas, there was a guiding force luring them toward their divine destination. This is our hope, too, as we follow the sparkling star in our eyes and in our spirits for 2019. We need to notice the epiphanies in our lives. We need to follow the stars in our eyes for what God has for us. Are we going to simply be at home with this fun story about three wise men and keep doing things the way we have always done them? Or might we try to go home a different way!

In this season of Epiphany, as the flickering candles dim and the holy light of life grows into a man, God calls us to wake up to the new roads ahead of us, those roads that stretch, surprise, and

change us. Epiphanies, ah-ha moments, can be found everywhere and in every situation, and they call us to take another road. It's time, Church. It's time, travelers of God, to follow King Jesus and go home by another way.

Amen.