

*Home by Another Way*  
Matthew 2:1-12

On Friday, the day after Christmas, someone greeted me by saying, “Happy New Year!” I know that isn’t unusual in this week between Christmas and New Year’s Day; but still, it caught me a little by surprise—how quickly we move past one event and on to the next one—even a holiday as big as Christmas, that we have been preparing for for weeks.

In the church, our tradition is to linger for a few weeks in the holiest of our holy days. The season of Easter lasts for fifty days, until Pentecost. We hold this season of Christmas for a few weeks—or at least twelve days, until Epiphany. Almost anybody can be touched emotionally by the birth of a baby. But for Christians, Christmas is about an extraordinary baby, and the day of Christmas is a beginning, not an ending.

The story of the magi, wise men who followed the star and came from the East to visit the newborn Messiah, is the story we tell in these days after Christmas, because it’s one of the first stories we have of how people acted—what they did, what they said—when they heard that a Messiah had been born.

Over the course of two thousand years, we have added a few details to satisfy our need to answer the question, “Did this really happen?” That question didn’t seem to matter so much to Matthew, so many of those details aren’t actually in the Gospel. Matthew never said there were *three* wise men. He didn’t say exactly where they came from, or whether it took them weeks or years to get to Bethlehem, or if the star they saw was in the sky or in their eyes. What mattered to Matthew when he told the story, and what we ought to listen for, I think, is the truth of the story measured in a different way.

We ought to be asking: Why did the people in this story think this baby was worth traveling hundreds of miles through a foreign country to find? And then, what has happened to people who paid attention to this story about the birth of a Messiah? Does the story make them more or less human? Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase their capacity for joy?

So listen again to this story about some wise people, who lived a long way away from Bethlehem...perhaps near one another, but maybe not.

Each of them had tried in their own way to find the secret that would make his life meaningful and satisfying. One tried reading great literature, hoping that in the words of big thinkers, he would find the secrets of the universe. Another had trained himself to live on nothing but dried herbs boiled in water, believing that emptiness would lead him to truth. The third had spent his whole fortune hiring personal trainers to teach him to walk on hot coals. Maybe by coincidence, maybe at some convention for spiritual seekers, they all met.

They recognized immediately that they were kindred spirits. Each of them sensed in one another that same tug he had felt, to start over, to give up all this striving that hadn’t been doing much

good, and to find something true. They all used different words, but each of them described a similar experience—the high expectations they felt every time they found a new technique for improving their life, the disappointing returns. And now, each of them had a very distinct feeling—a sense that seemed as bright and sure as a star—that there might be a different way to go, a different direction to look. What if it was something *real* this time, something powerful and concrete—like a new king they could follow? An actual *person* who had the wisdom and enlightenment they had been looking for?

And so they found themselves on the same journey. This was encouraging. Together, they traveled a long way. Sometimes they talked; sometimes they just rode in companionable silence. And when they got to Jerusalem, they went directly to the palace—because where else would you expect to find a king? Only what they found in the palace was not the different, enlightened kind of king they had hoped for. What they found there was Herod—and he seemed as foolishly arrogant and un-enlightened as the kings in their own land. This was *not* what they had come for. And so they moved on, still searching, still not sure exactly what it was they were looking for.

They kept going. In the evenings they walked through the streets of small towns, streets they would never have thought to look for a king on. This was harder than they thought it would be. They kept looking at one another with quizzical faces—none of them knew exactly what they were doing here—but they had come this far...

Until finally they knocked on the door of a small home. Were they sure this was the place, or were they just exhausted and ready to give up? I don't know, and it doesn't really matter, does it? What matters is that inside that modest little house they found a small child. A child who was not afraid of them, a child who seemed to have the same star in his eyes that they had seen, way back when they started this trip. Whoever this baby was, this was the one. Those wise men still didn't have a clue what all this meant, and they knew they'd never be able to explain it to anyone else, but they knew what they had to do. They got on their knees and worshiped—the same way you or I might stand at the edge of the ocean and just breathe, “thank you.”

Maybe because they felt awkward, the wise men began handing gifts to child's parents. Gifts that were ridiculously fancy: coins made of gold, a perfume called frankincense, oil of myrrh. They'd been carrying these things all this way...and the gifts had seemed right when they thought they'd be delivering them to a palace. Now that they were there in this little house, they seemed a little flashy. The wise men were embarrassed. This family could have made years of mortgage payments with the value of those gifts. If only they'd brought something more practical!

And those wise men knew, as surely as they were kneeling on that dirt floor, that until this very moment, they'd been looking in the wrong places for what would make their lives right. Of course a wiser king doesn't come out of the same palace where you find the other kings. And all those intellectual pursuits and physical disciplines they'd been practicing for years—they were only getting them ready for what they found here, here in this place they would have told you a month ago was way beneath their dignity, not worth their time.

By the time they left that little house with the baby in it, the world looked different to them. They were changed, in ways they were only beginning to figure out. *This* birth, this person who the wise men only saw once, as a child, was enough to change them forever.

“They went home by another way” are the words Matthew uses to finish the story of the wise men. Those words tell us that their path was changed by that pilgrimage the star led them on. They still went home. Back to the familiar places they lived, back to work, back to the people who still rubbed them the wrong way every time they opened their mouths. But *they* were different. Maybe when you have seen the star stop over a shack with a dirt floor, you have seen something that says, “Anything is possible.”

The birth of Jesus that we have just celebrated again has always been a sign that God is alive and at work right here among us. We live in a world that is both what it has always been and is suddenly new, all at the same time. We too go home, after every New Year’s resolution that we’re sure is going to “fix” us permanently, and even after we have seen the star .

The poet W.H. Auden wrote:

Music and sudden light  
Have interrupted our routine tonight  
And swept the filth of habit from our hearts.  
O here and now the endless journey starts.

Here and now the endless journey starts. Let’s go home. But let’s go by another way.