

St. David's Episcopal Church, Wayne, PA
The Epiphany (Transferred to January 9, 2022)
Text: Ephesians 3:1-12, and Matthew 2:1-12

Home by another Way!

We don't know much about these wise men. The only account of their existence is from Matthew's Gospel. They're not kings, of course, maybe magi – priests of ancient religions, or maybe astrologers. But, according to Matthew, we don't know who they are, where they come from, or how many of them there are. We say they are three because of the three gifts, but the Eastern Church has twelve wise men. Also, we don't know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was when they got there.

And yet, the story of the wisemen ranks right up there with the Christmas and Easter when it comes to haunting the human imagination. Some of our greatest artists and poets have been caught by the story. Longfellow even gave them the names Melchior, Gasper, and Balthasar. And many musicians have written songs about them.

Wise men from the East appear and they capture us. They're bold. They are brash! They're brazen enough to tell a pompous King Herod that they have come all the way to Judea to worship the real King of the Jews. They have the audacity to stand in Herod's majestic Jerusalem court and announce that his dynasty will be eclipsed. But as James Taylor sang in his song about the Magi, "steer clear of royal welcomes, avoid a big to-do...." So, these wise men saw through the deceitfulness of Herod, listened to God and went home another way.

That's sort of the story of our own lives, isn't it? From the moment we are born we are on a journey home. There are many roads we must travel, many Herod's along the way, many tricks and much deceitfulness to navigate, and there are always road blocks. Again and again, we must choose another way home. And we will make the right choice if we – like the wise men – stay true to the fact that we are pilgrims in search of a promise -- that promise being God's redeeming love manifested in a Bethlehem manger.

Nearly five decades after the story of the wise men, the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians tells us about the incarnation. He makes no reference to the birth of Jesus. He discloses no knowledge of the mysterious visitation of the wise men, but he shares their sense of awe and wonder. "In former generations," he explains to his friends in the Ephesian church, "this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit... (Ephesians 3:5 NRSV). This writer saw a big difference in stories that begin, "One upon at time," and our story that begins, "in the beginning." He believed that God's eternal mystery from "in the beginning" was finally revealed in the coming of Jesus. God's plan for the world's destiny, for the whole World's destiny was disclosed through the Bethlehem incarnation.

The wise men are drawn by the centripetal or unifying force of God's eternal mystery, and their story balances the Christmas story of the angles and shepherds. The shepherds are Jewish, and the angel announces that their long-awaited messiah is here. This Jesus is the one foretold in their scriptures, the reason for their hope. The wise men are not Jewish; they are Gentiles, non-Jews, pagans. They do not worship the God of Israel as far as we know. They are scholars and scientists of the ancient world who study the skies.

Add the Epiphany story to the Christmas story and the conclusion is unavoidable: Jesus is not just for one people, his own people, the Jews. Jesus is for everybody: all nations and races and peoples and languages. He is not only the Jewish messiah, but he is the universal savior. He is not only the king of Israel, but reigns over all the earth. The wise men show us the fulfillment of God's great mystery. And after coming to Jesus, they must go home another way.

You and I know this is not easy. As seekers of Jesus Christ, we too are called to travel a different road. Coming to God, being pulled toward God centripetally, we are then propelled outward centrifugally, out into the world another way. We come to Jesus to offer what we have and discover that the road behind is now closed. Yet we go out into the world, empowered by what we have seen and experienced in the incarnate God. Coming to God and returning to the ends of the earth by another way is really what Epiphany is all about. Later in this service, as we come to the altar to receive the body of Christ, we acknowledge by that taking that we are a part of an exciting mystery and that God's eternal purpose has been carried out through the Messiah "in whom we have access to God..." (Eph 3:112, NRSV). We take the body of Christ and go out another way.

There are so many ways home, and often the road before us is not the one we thought we would travel. And it may not be the one we want to travel but it is where God puts us. For seventy-seven years God has been changing my way home. Sometimes it has been gentle changes and sometimes it has been quite a jolt. But three successful and very different careers later, I stand in awe of God's strength and purpose. Just when I thought I was retired and winding down, God brought all those experiences together in these five years I have been blessed to minister at St. David's. The incredible staff, the wise and dedicated clergy, and the blessing of developing a friendship and ministering with Frank Allen have humbled me, deepened my spirit, and brought me closer to God. This is hallowed ground but now I must continue my journey home by another way. I am stepping down as associate clergy person on this wonder staff, and joining my wife Kim to sing in the choir. At this point, I plan to continue they way home until Clair tells me I am too old to sing any longer. Still going home but by another way.

Now, I don't know how most of you have come here this morning, what journey, what seeking, what twisting's and turnings have brought you here. But I do know this. If you will dare to come to the manger, to kneel and lay what you have before Jesus, then I can promise that you will go home another way. And that other way is the way to life.

Amen. And may God bless you.