

Sermon Title: They Took Another Road  
Text: Matthew 2: 1 - 12  
Date: January 6, 2019

There are such interesting layers of history, and folklore, and spirituality, and theology reflected in this passage that we could have fun with this morning! There are no shortage of paths we could wander off on, but I am going to have to exercise some discipline, particularly with our time constraints. Suffice it to say that I think there are aspects to this story that should be uniquely appealing to the good people of Shepherdstown Presbyterian. Additionally, a new insight came to me this week that just could make this story uniquely relevant to this day when we ordain new elders.

With all due respect to our Children's Pageant last week, a careful read of this passage will make it clear that our tradition has embellished things a bit. So let's start with a quiz. Who knows who Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar were? [The three wise men, you say?] *And how do you know that?* Interesting! There is no mention of these three in the Bible at all. The first mention of these names were found in a mosaic in Ravenna, Italy around 560, and about 150 years later they were written about in a treatise by the Venerable Bede, an English monk.

So then, let's back up a little bit. How do we know there were three wise men? No mention of three wise men in the Bible. This idea was likely developed by tradition simply because the Bible *does* talk about three gifts that the magi brought.

The point is that I am going to ask you to really think about *the significance* of this Biblical account this morning – *and it really is significant!* – but to do so we need to go beyond the various sentimental manger scene images that you may have grown up with. Heck, there is no mention that the wise men were ever even at the manger! Our text today refers to them entering a house, not a stable; and seeing Jesus as a child, not an infant.

While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were kings, a more precise description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was highly regarded as a science at that time.

So then these "Wise Ones" from the East were scientists, and practiced other religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ! You listening? More ironic, God used scientists who practiced other religions to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes in on the news that their Messiah had been born. Are you beginning to see how wild this actually is? Are you having an epiphany?

In the church calendar, today is called Epiphany. It is always celebrated on January 6, which just happens to fall on Sunday this year. If a dictionary understanding of the word "**epiphany**" means "**a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something,**" the theological understanding of the word refers to the manifestation or revelation that the Christ is no longer limited to Jewish tradition. The reason this religious festival is seen as significant is because the visit of the Magi demonstrates that God's plan is for the Gentiles too; that is, *the whole world*. What an epiphany! Do you see it?

I could almost image this as the Feast Day of Shepherdstown Presbyterian. We say that "**our faith and practice are rooted in the way of Jesus,**" but we intentionally add that our orientation is "**enriched by wisdom from all sources.**" I find it wonderfully ironic that so many of the Christian churches that are squeamish about being in dialogue with other religious traditions have no trouble dressing their children up as Magi every year.

When I have preached on this passage before I have sometimes played with this primal image of “journey” as a metaphor for our own life of faith. In particular I have been intrigued with the final verse in our reading today: **“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”** (v. 12)

This image of **“going home another way”** provides such a powerful *spiritual image* as well. None of us – once we have been spiritually awakened – can go back on the same path on which we came. As a matter of fact, Pope Gregory the Great (540-604) once said, **“Having come to know Jesus we are forbidden to return by the way we came.”** There are many reasons we can’t go home the same way, not the least of which is the very fact that our spiritual understanding of “home” has changed – that space where we feel profoundly welcomed, and at rest, has changed. Having heard many stories of your own spiritual pilgrimage, I know that many of you here could never find your spiritual home by returning the way you came. You can relate to this.

Some of this is communicated in a light-hearted, yet surprisingly profound, song by James Taylor *“Home By Another Way.”* Consider this *“bonus material”* that will be available on the church Facebook page after the service today. I believe that James Taylor is onto something when he sings a lot about Herod. He sings, **“Go home another way. Steer clear of royal welcomes. Avoid a big to-do. A king who would slaughter the innocents will not cut a deal for you.”**

So who or what is Herod in your life? Herod is that image that looks powerful and impressive on the outside, but demands your loyalty out of insecurity and neediness. Herod will woo you and court you, but won’t think twice about killing you in the end. So very much of what we seem to value will suck the life out of us in the end. So go home another way. Go home on the path that the Beloved leads you.

So let me tell you how I think this might relate to ordaining elders today. Last time I preached on this passage I reflected on “going home another way” from the vantage point of a *personal* spiritual pilgrimage. Today, however, I am inspired to think of it from the vantage point of a *corporate* spiritual pilgrimage. I might be extrapolating a bit here, but in all likelihood there were several Magi who had to agree together on path.

We have a couple of exceptionally gifted, bright individuals that we are ordaining today. We love the gifts that you bring to the table. Let me be clear, however. However impressive your resume, or management experience is, this pales in comparison to the gifts we really need.

Like the Magi, we need people committed to corporate spiritual discernment. The Magi didn’t have a spirited debate, and then set off with each going in his or her direction. The Magi came together, and left together. I pray that you will aid us as we aspire to *travel together* as we follow the light. I have always found it to be a problematic form of leadership when one gets so far ahead of the pack that they then turn around and realize that no one is following. If we are indeed going to make it through the desert, we need to value traveling together. We need the gifts of the Magi to be good listeners to one another, knowing that one person alone does not have all the answers. Rather than looking down on “lesser Magi,” we need to deeply believe that each person carries gifts that are needed by the whole.

No doubt, I could go on and on, but you get the idea. On this Epiphany Sunday let’s not settle for tradition, but celebrate the deeper meaning: the story of Spirit breaking into the world told in a way that recognizes how different paths led to the same Light. Let’s be flexible enough to go home another way. And let’s learn from the Magi the call to *corporate* spiritual discernment.

We're all in this together!

Amen.

Matthew 2: 1 – 12

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.’”

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.