

“By a Different Way”
January 5, 2025

Matthew 2:1-12

The Christmas season ends today—and many breathe a sigh of relief!

The Christmas season ends in returning—no, I don’t mean taking the unwanted gifts back, although, most likely, there has been some of that.

The Christmas season ends in returning to where we were.

Remember the story from the Gospel of Luke that we heard on Christmas Eve? After the angels announced peace on earth to the shepherds, they left those astonished shepherds and, Luke says, “returned to heaven.”

And those astonished shepherds? After they got a glimpse of the baby Jesus and told the incredible news that they had heard from the angels to everyone who would listen, they returned to their flocks.

Our own lives echo this biblical model. Most likely, any out-of-town guests who were visiting you in recent weeks, like the Magi, have left for their own countries as well.

Maybe that came with some relief—wasn’t it Ben Franklin who first said that fish and house guests both start to smell after three days? One of my favorite Christmas movies is *The Man Who Came to Dinner*—the story of the chaos that ensues when a guest *doesn’t* leave. But the *good* guests? They’ve returned home.

Your presence here this morning indicates that if *you* were traveling at Christmas, *you* have now returned as well—although I in no way mean to imply that anyone tired of *your* company.

After Christmas—we return.

It’s the biblical thing to do. Even after the resurrection joy of Easter, the disciples returned to their previous occupation of fishing.

Like the magi, like the angels and shepherds, after Christmas we get on with our lives. We take down the tree, pick up where we left off, and return to *normal*—whatever that might be.

After Christmas—we return.

Today, even the magi head off stage, on their way home, and that pretty much wraps things up for another year.

We don’t know who they were, these magi. Their names and number are speculation at best. Still, we hear their story—and bring it into our Christmas pageants and celebrations—because they show the same questioning, searching, and doubting that we know in our own lives.

We often call them Wise Men, but they were kind of clueless. They were sages, not know-it-alls. They didn’t know where they were going. And when they stopped to ask directions, they chose

to ask King Herod, of all people. Herod himself had no idea, so he summoned the chief priests and the scribes, who, reading the prophet, Micah, pointed them toward Bethlehem.

With the star, with the scriptures, they make their way to their destination. They find the child whom they seek. They left, we are told, by a different way.

They change direction. They were to return to Herod. But they go home by a different road, a path of their own choosing; a path neither shown by the stars or revealed by the scriptures.

It is that different road that interests me this year.

With the news of the death of Jimmy Carter this past week, I remembered the week he spent in Milwaukee with Habitat for Humanity while I served a small church there—a long time ago. One of the members of the congregation was a carpenter and he spent several hours by Carter's side. He did not work with Carter the President, the Nobel Prize winner. He worked with a simple, friendly guy, pounding nails. Carter returned to his life after his presidency by a different way.

As we pause in these days and as we move forward in these days, we have the opportunity to think about and choose the road on which we will travel.

The way will be made known to us as we talk together and listen carefully to one another and as we share our hope and our fears for these days and the years ahead.

And as we travel on different road, when we find we're going the wrong way, we can always turn in a new direction. The religious word for that is repentance—and it is always about choice. It means we set aside some of the past normal so that something new can emerge.

We consider what might need to change as we move through the year ahead. (You know the old joke: How many Congregationalists does it take to change a lightbulb? The answer: Change? There's also another answer: 5—one to change the bulb and four to sit around and talk about how good the old lightbulb was.) Yes, the old light bulb was good, but it might not shine as brightly as it once did.

So here we are—wherever “here” is for us today. Changes keep coming our way.

The twentieth-century monk, Thomas Merton wrote of the importance of standing in the living presence in day like ours: “In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.”

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going.” I like that. Those words are good news for those of us who often feel clueless. We don't know everything. So, instead, let us, as Merton suggests, recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope.

You see, in most respects, we're pretty much the same people that we were back in November, aren't we? We still have the same strengths that we bring to our work and our families, to this city and this congregation. We still have the same concerns about our world and the poverty, hunger, and violence that still haunt it. And, yes, we're still dealing with the same foibles, flaws, and, well, sin, in spite of the goodwill and resolve that we've known in recent weeks.

Christmas, Epiphany—such days don't change us. This, perhaps, was part of the wisdom of the old Congregational neglect of such occasions. But Christmas and Epiphany do remind us that God is at work in our world and in our lives—telling us that even we might be transformed by God's love; even we might be remade in the image of Christ.

Return by a different way.

You can take that literally if you want—go down a different street on your way home today or on your way to work tomorrow.

Or go down the unfamiliar, unknown roads of this New Year—finding new opportunities, new challenges, new wonder.

Epiphany brings our Christmas celebrations to a conclusion. The angels have gone. The shepherds and the Magi have found their different ways home. But I ask that do this: Read Matthew's story of the magi again sometime this week. Notice that God is never mentioned.

And that, too, tells us something about our way ahead and how we will find it. God is with us, yes. But God is with us “unobtrusively and ambiguously”¹ as one person put it. This is how God chooses to be with us—in a way beyond our deepest fears and our wildest hopes.

Most depictions of the Magi show them on their way to Bethlehem, following a brilliant star, riding on camels with a caravan of gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Or they are shown arriving in Bethlehem and offering these same gifts to the infant Jesus.

Allan Crite offers a different perspective in his work, “The Departure of the Magi.” They seem lacking their usual splendor. Instead, we get just a glimpse of them, as through a window. They almost seem to be sneaking out of town. And perhaps they are. Avoiding Herod, the return by a different way. The star that guided them is still there in the distance. In the foreground, however, we see Mary and her baby—the point of the whole story.

The Magi, the shepherds, even the angels of heaven all minor players in this story of birth, this good news that God is with us.

As we return in our different ways, let us keep our eyes on what is important.

¹ Eugene Boring, Matthew, NIB, vol. 8, pg. 143.