

Home By Another Way

I am horrible with directions. And I cannot read a map to save my life. When I was first driving, my parents trusted me enough to take one of their cars and meet them at a family reunion in Novi. This was before map quest and GPS and cell phones. My father told me how to get there. He didn't write it down, he just told me. How hard could it be?

I ended up at the docks of the Detroit River. I had to ask a perfect stranger how to get to Novi while I cried. I finally made it to the family reunion, 3 hours late! The next time they trusted me with their car for a road trip I was heading up north to my Aunt's house in Topinabee. I called my dad when I arrived and he asked me if I had seen the Ambassador Bridge on my way there.

I have had to learn different routes all the time in my line of work. As a pastor, remember, I am appointed to different churches when the Bishop decides it is time for me to move. So I have lived in 5 different neighborhoods during my tenure as a pastor. I started in Detroit, and then Hazel Park, and then Clarkston, and then Chesterfield and now back in Detroit.

In each of those appointments I had to learn where things were. And then after I learned where things were, I got to learn the back ways of getting there, the short cuts if you will. Parishioners are always telling me, "no, that's out of your way, you need to go this way." And so I learned different ways to get to places. Some were fast when I needed them to be and some were scenic drives along the water, either lakes or rivers when I needed a calming view. And just when I had learned all the different ways, I would be moved and had to learn it all over again.

And working here at Central, it's really been difficult because you all live in like 15 different neighborhoods so I am always using my GPS to get around to you. And no, I still cannot read a map to save my life.

A friend of mine told me that he tried to make a habit of taking different roads for a change of scenery, to keep himself alert, to avoid fading into that dangerous area of autopilot, when you're so familiar with the road, you can do it subconsciously and not even remember how you arrived at your destination.

I think going home by another way is a good idea because it's an opportunity to explore and learn new things.

In the familiar story from Matthew, we know that when the wise men came from the east, they were following a star. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked for directions. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Somehow they knew he was special, that he was someone to be worshipped.

But another King – Herod – heard about their search for this new king and Matthew reports that Herod was frightened. More accurately, I think Herod felt threatened. If this child really was the Messiah that had been foretold by prophets throughout the decades, he would be powerful enough to overthrow Herod and many others in high places. Herod's position was threatened. His authority was threatened. His power was threatened.

The little Lord Jesus who sleeps peacefully, never cries and cares tenderly for all the dear children is a threat to those in power. But Herod figures he has some time to turn things around since this new king is still a baby. He sends the wise men to Bethlehem to find the child. And he directs them, “When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

There are a number of things about these men from the east that made them wise. Mostly, though, I believe it was the sacrifices they made. They were willing to go wherever they had to go and travel for as long as it took to find the one for whom the star shone. Maybe it was their curiosity as astrologers that kept them following that star. Maybe it was wanderlust that kept them traveling further from home. Most likely, it was the call of God that propelled them forward to find something extra special, something they believed would fill an emptiness in their souls.

When they finally arrived in Bethlehem – not just twelve days, in reality it was more like two years after Jesus was born – 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. In the presence of this child, these wealthy, scholarly, respected men knew they were not worthy to be in the presence of such greatness and glory. On their knees, they worshipped him.

They opened their treasure chests. Even the most expensive gift felt like too little, like it didn't come close to demonstrating what they felt in their hearts. As a child, Jesus couldn't give them anything. He didn't even know who they were. But somehow they knew that they owed him everything.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country, their own home, by another way.

Our art for this morning on the front of your bulletin is entitled “The Wise Men's Dream by Rev. Lauren Wright Pittman. She says, “In this image, the Wise Men are sleeping and the viewer has a window into their vibrant dream. Surrounding the dream is the deep blue patterning of stars and hands pointing in every direction except for the direction of God's leading. These hands represent King Herod's desperate search and desire to take out this threatening, newborn King of the Jews. The Wise Men have a choice. They could succumb to the pressure of the King, which is thick in the air and pressing in all around them, or they could choose to listen to the mysterious guiding of their sleeping vision. They decide to change up the narrative and resist the domineering, violent powers of this world, trusting their dream, and taking the long, likely dangerous, journey home by another way.

You know how it feels after being away from home. Whether you've been on the most fantastic trip of your life; whether you've been visiting precious family members that you rarely see; whether you've been stuck in an airport or sick in the hospital; even if it's just been a very long day at work – we all want to go straight home. Take the fastest route. No unnecessary stops. Definitely no detours or going the back way. Just get home as quickly as possible.

It took years for the wise men to finally reach Bethlehem. Years. Still, they went home by another way.

Why? Well, they were warned in a dream. But unless we read the remainder of chapter two, which the lectionary never includes for us, we can only assume what Herod had in mind for the child once the wise men reported where they found him.

In those remaining verses, Matthew tells how Herod planned to destroy the child. And when he found out that the wise men had tricked him, “he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.”

One way or another, Herod was going to secure his position on the throne, no matter who got in his way. He had no regard for anyone but himself, no respect for human life; even the lives of innocent children meant nothing to him.

Fortunately, the wise men were not afraid of Herod. Though they had already sacrificed much to honor Jesus, the sacrifice of going home by another way was more important than all the rest combined. They changed their way home. They changed their plans. They changed direction. They changed their ways. They risked going off the map. They took a new and unfamiliar path. The ones we call the wise men changed their lives for the sake of Jesus and all who would call him Savior.

It is 2022. It's a new year. We are in the midst of a new re-development project. But we don't know where it will lead us this year. We don't know what injustices will occur and what oppressions will happen. We don't even know what tools we will need to navigate the new territory of the future.

We are being called to go by another way, to resist the temptation to stay safe and stay the same. We are being called to risk, to change, to experiment, to try and fail and try again. We are being called to sacrifice the easy and familiar path for one that may include mountains where we expect rivers. We might see the Ambassador Bridge and not reach NOVI after all. We may even be called to forge a new path altogether.

I pray that we will see the challenges before us as opportunities, that as a family of faith, we will be of one mind, bound together by a common purpose. I pray that we will be filled with the wisdom and courage of the wise men. I pray that we will follow a path of light, that we will search diligently with open minds and hearts for the gifts of God.

Listen to this poem called Muscle Memory by Rev. Sarah Speed.

Going home is a form of muscle memory
Start the car.
Turn on the lights.
Turn left.
Turn right.
Pass the big oak tree
and the empty school yard.
Look for the house with the light on.
Look for the house with the open door.
Look for the house that says, “Welcome home.”

You'll know when you've arrived –
that's the thing about muscle memory.

But I am learning things of love,
and home is not home unless all are welcomed,
and muscle memory is not justice unless all are safe.
So I'm asking – can we start the car
and get totally lost
chasing what is right
far off on the horizon?

Can we drive off the road
and get a flat tire
if it means paving the way
for justice and truth?

Can we circle the trees
and miss the school yard completely
if this new way home
includes space for grace?

Can we waste our time
driving in circles
if it gives us time
to add people to the car?

I am learning,
muscle memory and faith
are not one and the same.

So I am asking.
Will you start the car?
Will you turn on the lights?
Will you take a deep breath?

It might be time to get lost.
It might be time to find a new way home.

We have traveled together and now the star has stopped. As our life journeys continue, looking at the example of the Magi and at the stories of the past weeks, consider what will be your way, the next step along the journey. Wherever the Spirit is leading, know you are loved and that God is with you, always close to home. Amen.