

“The Road Isn’t Straight”

Matthew 2:1-12

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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What is it I like to remind you of at this point in January? Many of you have heard me say this before - Christmas is not over yet.

I know many people shut off the twinkling lights and take down their trees as soon after December 25 as they can muster the energy. But the 12 days of Christmas, that most of us know because we’ve sung about them, they actually go through today.

And tomorrow, January 6, is Epiphany, the time when we celebrate the manifestation of God, especially to the Gentiles. In the story of the magi coming to visit young Jesus, we are reminded that God-with-us is a God for all of us.

So, here we sit, continuing to celebrate the ways God showed up in the person of Jesus, the ways God continues to show up, the ways God is not only for us but for everyone.

That’s one of the things that this story of magi teaches us. Perhaps it is the thing that we most often focus on.

But there is something else that we don’t want to miss in this story. Did you hear that last verse of our reading? *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road* (Matthew 2:12, NRSVUE).

The magi, who were actually astrologers who practiced the religion of Zoroastrianism, had set out because they saw a star that they understood to announce the birth of a new king. They did what was reasonable. They went to Jerusalem - the place where kings were found. They talked to Herod, the king who was, at that time, on the throne. They did what made the most sense. They worked within the systems they knew. They talked to the people who had power.

But, in the end, they did not return to Jerusalem. They did not again speak to Herod. They instead, went home by a different road.

They went home a different way because they realized that Herod wasn’t who he claimed to be.

They went home a different way because doing so was a way they could protect Jesus.

They went home a different way because the powers-that-be were preparing to use power for destructive ends.

They went home a different way because they listened. The Bible tells us they were told in a dream. And they paid attention. Whatever that was...a dream, their instincts, God...they listened and they shifted their plan accordingly.

Now, speaking of plans. Am I the only one here who is a planner? I love to see a fresh calendar laid out in front of me. I still use a paper calendar and love to write things in. I love writing in everything: from the birthdays, to the mundane routine tasks, to the big events and occasions that we are anticipating in the coming year. I love to look ahead. I love to know what's going to happen and when it's going to happen and how we are going to get there.

But sometimes, things don't go as planned.

Last year, in fact, we had made plans for a big trip to celebrate our older child's graduation. We had our plane reservations. We had other details lined up. And then he tore his ACL. And when we talked to the surgeon, it became clear that in order to get him well healed before he moved off to college, we would need to cancel our travel plans.

Thankfully in the big scheme of things, that is a small disappointment. We will get that trip back on the calendar. We will find another time.

But, friends, as we sit here in the early days of a new year, I am reminded that the year ahead for so many of us both twinkles with possibility and looms with fear of what may be.

And while to some degree this is always true. Many of us are feeling it a little more this year. We are in touch with the reality that the road is not straight. That sometimes we end up going in a direction other than what we expected. That sometimes the distance to our dreams is longer than we anticipated.

But what I love is that the new year of our secular calendar comes right in the middle of the Christmas season. So, the Christmas proclamation - that God is with us in the midst of the joys and sorrows, the delights and disappointments, all the experiences of our humanity - that proclamation is still on our lips.

Sometimes things go smoothly, sometimes they go as expected. Sometimes they even go better.

And, sometimes, they go in a very different direction. Sometimes the road is longer and more twisting and more difficult than we imagined.

The reminder of the Christmas season is that in all of those experiences, God is with us.

So, as we look out over the coming year, I wonder what tools we have for this journey?

Perhaps, Advent gifts us with some of those.

Remember the gifts of Advent...hope, peace, joy, and love? They don't go away when Christmas comes. Rather they are tools we can carry with us into all that is expected and all that is unexpected in the year ahead.

Remember the responses we have written each week during worship throughout Advent? You have answered questions and made commitments about the ways you will help others see the belovedness in themselves...the ways you will deepen connections and support other people. You have answered questions about the good that you are called to do and the better world you hope for and you have made commitments about what you are willing to risk to see that happen.

Remember the gratitudes we wrote down last week? Gratitude is one of the most hopeful practices. It is something that can accompany us through even the difficult times.

Friends, a new year is upon us. And no matter what - through all the easy and joyful moments as well as the detours and difficulties - God is with us, God will be with us, God never leaves us.

I want to share with you a prayer for the turning of the year from the Iona Community:

“At the turning of the year,
turn our ache into action.
At the turning of the year,
turn our fear towards love.
At the turning of the year,
re-turn our hearts to you,
loving, living God.
Amen.”

May we, on whatever roads we travel, journey with God and with each other. May we listen, that wherever we go, we might make the world a better place.