

By Another Road
Matthew 2:1-12
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Epiphany - it is more than an ah-ha moment, more than a sudden insight. In the church, Epiphany is that season of the church year that falls between Christmas and Lent. It is a time when we celebrate the ways that God keeps showing up in the world, the ways that God is made manifest among us.

More specifically Epiphany is a day, a feast day within Christianity, a day observed on January 6 when we remember the magi coming to meet the child Jesus. In this story the magi are people in whom we are reminded that Jesus did not come for just *one* group of people of *one* common religion living in *one* small area, but the magi remind us that he was for all people.

Now if you worshiped with us last week, it may feel like we have taken a step back today. After all, last week we read Matthew 2:13-23 and today our reading is the earlier verses from that same chapter, verses 1-12. So, even though we have already read what comes after the magi depart, we don't want to go any further beyond Christmas without spending some time with them and hearing their story.

The magi. They have been represented in so many ways.

Because of that familiar carol, a song which we will sing here in a little while today, we think of them as kings and we assume, to match the gifts listed, that there were three of them.

Because of our nativity sets, we cram them together with the shepherds and the farm animals and we assume they showed up at some animal enclosure in Bethlehem during Jesus' first hours or days of life.

But the reality is that the occasion of Epiphany reminds us that it was likely some time later that the magi arrived - likely when Jesus wasn't an infant, but rather a toddler. And they weren't kings but rather those who read the

stars and interpreted them. All of this is part of their story, if we can set aside what tradition has taught us and really hear what scripture indicates.

So, let's remember their story.

Matthew tells us that having observed a star which they understood to announce the birth of a king, these people (likely along with an entourage of support staff) came to Jerusalem, where King Herod would have lived. Of course, not only have we been taught to be suspicious of Herod, but what we discover in the telling of this story is that this visit from these strangers set Herod spinning in fear.

Meanwhile, he was smart enough to cool his reaction, to act interested, and to see what information he could glean that would help him protect his position. Remember what we heard last week - the threat to children under two years old? That's where this story led as King Herod couldn't stand the thought of such a challenge. But he certainly didn't indicate such fear and anger to the magi when they encountered him.

So, Matthew tells us that Herod, again feigning interest, sent the magi on their way to find the child who had been born and asked them to return to him with news, seemingly so he could send a gift or pay a visit.

Off the magi went until they found the household for which they were looking. Mary likely standing cooking over a fire, Joseph likely out in the workshop completing an order, toddler Jesus likely getting into something his parents wished he would leave alone.

These surprise visitors, likely after an awkward moment of Mary straightening her dress and retrieving little Jesus from whatever trouble he was about to encounter, offered gifts to him, inevitably along with some answers to Mary's questions about how in the world they got there in the first place.

This is the story we know. The story of the visit from foreign strangers...of an affirmation of Jesus' importance...of gifts generously given.

But the story ends with a sentence that we usually just read past, a sentence we treat as transitional, but with which I want to invite us to spend a little time.

Verse 12 reads, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

And while we can envision them looking at a map and determining a second route, a safer route, a route upon which they can make it home without risking the lives of themselves or the child, what if this is about more than a physical journey?

What if we don't only picture them changing the settings on their GPS to avoid highways or toll roads, but instead, what if we ask questions about what changed within them?

Because, yes, while they certainly went home, physically, by a different road. They also must have gone home different...different for the discoveries they made...different for all they encountered...different due to both the joy and the stress of this journey...different because in what they experienced they encountered God.

So, what about us?

Where do we meet God? Where is God made manifest to us? How open to experiencing God, in both expected and unexpected ways and places, are we?

And how are we changed because of those encounters?

How are we willing to be changed? After all, change can be difficult. It can be challenging to set aside our expectations, our plans, the ways we have done things or thought about things. It can be difficult to be willing to let go of what we expect in order to experience something new.

I wonder how quickly the magi realized that they needed to travel home by another road.

I wonder if they felt beholden to Herod, if one or more of them was hesitant to listen to the dream because they had told Herod they would come back and report in.

I wonder if they immediately knew that they had encountered the divine in a new way and that something within them had been changed.

I wonder the same things about us.

In this season of Epiphany we are challenged to be paying attention for the ways that we will encounter God, the ways that the voice of God will speak to us. But I wonder how ready we are to hear that voice...how willing we will be to claim it when we do.

I wonder if we are willing to let go of our expectations...expectations about who we are or what this year will look like or what it means to live fully in our faith. I wonder if we can let go of these and be open to traveling a different way, to being a different person.

I wonder if we, upon encountering the divine, will find ways to live courageously in this new year, to be brave in our living and our loving, in our offering of compassion and fighting for justice.

I wonder what might change in us if we are open to meeting God in the many ways and places God shows up, even when it's different than we expect.

Friends, what would it mean for you to travel this year by another road? What would it mean for you to live your life in a different, more faithful, way? What would it mean for you to embrace the God who keeps showing up in and around you, and to be shaped anew to carry the light of God's love with you?

May we, alongside the magi, listen to the voice that nudges us to new life and may we be willing to go forward by another road. Amen.