



# “Finding Another Road”

Text: Matthew 1:1-12

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Some of you are old enough to remember the family Sunday afternoon drive. The purpose was not to go anywhere in particular, but to simply enjoy the ride and time with the family. We sang together without benefit of karaoke tapes. We did not have built in screens with DVD players to provide in-flight movie. Gas was around 30 cents a gallon and the roads were beckoning.

There were no navigational systems, other than a map from the Gulf or Esso stations. (yes, I am that old). We did not have GPS and that lovely lady who took the place of the navigator in telling the driver where to go. And if we got lost, who cared - we were making good time.

The Sunday afternoon drive was a time for discovery, for exploration, for breakthroughs. We discovered little places we could never find again, simple because we had stumbled upon them. It was a total “in the moment” experience and many was the time when we would arrive back home after dark.

I’m not sure anyone does that any more. It’s too expensive. It’s boring (as we often hear). It’s not fun.

If our Sunday afternoon jaunts seem old and out-dated, the story of the Magi following a star probably sounds even less inviting. Truth be told, it sounds a little ridiculous. Let’s be clear: if these people were so smart and wise, surely there was a better way for them to navigate. Moving stars? Hard to navigate by them. Stars are supposed to be steady in the heavens and enable us to figure out where we are and where we are supposed to be heading. Start moving the stars around and the task is impossible.

I am sure that there are more than a few churches this morning where an explanation of what the Star of Bethlehem was and how it came to shine so brightly as to entice the Magi to leave their comforts and head to a place they did not know are being offered. Perhaps it was a comet, or the alignment of planets, or a supernova. We really have no idea.

But none of that is what this story is really about.

And in order to get to the heart of the matter, we need to remember that this story is from Matthew's gospel. Matthew assumed that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus lived in Bethlehem and later moved to Nazareth. There is no stable in the Matthew Christmas Story. There are no shepherds and sheep. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother," Matthew's story goes. "The house" - did you hear it? Not "the stable."

And, contrary to the carol we will sing again, these were not "kings" nor were they from "the Orient." For that matter, we don't know if there were three or thirty-three. We join in with those making the conjecture that three gifts - gold, frankincense, and myrrh - are brought by three people. One gift per wise man. Matthew's gospel does not tell us how many there were. We are told they are "wise men from the East," and the word used could mean "magician," "astrologer," or refer to those who gave meaning and interpretation to "dreams, portents, and strange happenings."

But these strange visitors show up, and this is the beginning of a message that Matthew makes again and again in his gospel. If Jesus is a king - as he is recognized in Matthew's gospel - there is a political side to Jesus that is explosive. If Jesus is the "King of the Jews" that the wise men claim, it means that Herod is not. If Jesus is the King, Herod - like all earthly rulers - are usurpers and imposters - claiming an authority that is not theirs.

But, wait, there's more. If Jesus is a King, acknowledged as such by the wise men, then it means that Jesus' rule is not limited to the Jews. The wise men are not Jews. Read the prophets and over and over they speak of One who will bring justice and peace to all people. Add to that the fact that by the time Matthew is writing his gospel, the early church is trying to figure out what to do with Gentiles who are becoming part of the Jesus movement. Did Jesus come only for the Jews? Or did Jesus come for Gentiles - non-Jews - too?

All of that is behind the story of the wise men visiting Jesus. They undertook a journey - a pilgrimage - to find something - someone - for whom their hearts were seeking. They were in search of answers to long-held questions. They were somewhere between the physical and the spiritual - which is where most pilgrimages take place. They were in that "thin place" where there is often far more than meets the eye.

Their efforts are rewarded and they find the object of their searching. "They were overwhelmed with joy," Matthew tells us. C.S. Lewis called it "surprised by joy." "Joy," says Lewis, "is the serious business of heaven." Joy is what we were created to experience, to know for ourselves. The wise men were overwhelmed with joy. Lucky fellows.

And then, we are told, they are warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, whose devious purposes were clearly seen in his request that the wise men return and tell him where the child could be found. The empire will be after Jesus through Matthew's gospel. As he challenges the powers of his day, Jesus will be hunted down until, finally, the world's powers ultimately bring about his death.

So, the wise men go home by "finding another road" our translation tells us. They don't return the seven miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. They head off, maybe through the hills of Moab to Bethlehem's east. They will not be a party to Herod's plot to kill the child.

But, what if we move beyond the literal and take "finding another road" as a metaphor? What if we think about the idea that when you find Jesus, when Jesus finds you, when you encounter Jesus - you can't go back the way you came? What if finding another road is about embracing the new way that Jesus came to pioneer and offer to all of us?

What if "finding another road" is about abandoning the search for power and wealth and prestige? What if an encounter with Christ helps us see more clearly how many of God's own children are hungry, thirsty, ill-clothed, homeless, sick, or trapped in a life that has no joy? What if finding Jesus means a radical transformation of our own lives, leading us to compassion, generosity, understanding, and action?

The word that we often translate from the Greek as "repent" is the word *metanoia*. It literally means "another way" or a 180 degree change of direction. What if the pilgrimage to discover God's love asks us to live "another way?" Isn't that the very nature of the good news? You don't have to live that way anymore. You can live this new way - this "other" way.

What if "finding another road" is a way of saying that there is a new life that is birthed once we have encountered God's love in Jesus Christ?

Epiphany means "revelation" and "realization." When we fully see and experience God's revelation in Jesus Christ we realize that life can - and frankly - must be different. We can't go on living the way we lived. We have to live by traveling another road.

This Table is a Table of revelation and realization. At this Table, we see and realize that God is with us - that grace surrounds us - and that joy is breaking out all around us. And when we realize that, we want to present our gifts of homage and worship - a stewardship of joy.

Don't travel home the same way you came here. Don't miss the opportunity to be overwhelmed by joy. Don't miss the chance to change it all. It's more than a resolution, more than a vow, more than a promise. God is offering us another road - a better road - a road that leads to joy and hope and love and peace and justice. For now and evermore. Amen.



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