

“Another Road”
Matthew 2: 1-12
Epiphany/B, January 4, 2009
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Here we are. We have reached the end of another Christmas season. By now the radio stations have stopped playing “holiday” music. As a matter of fact, we were walking through the airport the other day on our way home from Florida and my daughter noticed they were still playing. She declared “enough, already, no more Christmas music, time to move on.” You’ll see Christmas trees dotting the landscape ready to be picked up. You’ve consumed your fill of fudge and if you never see another sugar cookie until next December it will be too soon.

On Christmas Eve we heard the birth story. On that night unexpected visitors went to find the Christ child. Smelly shepherds keeping watch over their smellier sheep were sent by the angels to find a baby. There was no time to freshen up, not time to explain why you had abandoned your flock. They went with haste to find the baby. There he lay, in a manger with his parents, safe and sound, waiting to change the world. Now we hear of another set of travelers who were sent on a similar journey. Perhaps their journey began at precisely the same moment as the shepherd’s. These travelers came from quite a distance. It would take them many days to arrive at their final destination. From the moment of Jesus’ birth, God has been sending people to find this one we call the Prince of Peace.

Today we hear the Epiphany story. Matthew is the only writer to tell of the wise men, the ones we call the magi. This story always leaves me with more questions than answers. What compelled them to follow this star? How did they know what to bring? When and why did the star appear to them and how long was the journey? When they had reached their approximate destination the men knew enough to stop to ask for help. But why would God send them on this journey and not give them all the information they needed? They were sent to find a king; therefore they presumed that the current king would know what was going on. As we hear, King Herod knew nothing of this child or his significance; however, he the wise men made him both curious and suspicious. He insisted that the magi return to tell him everything so he might also go to pay homage. King Herod had very different intentions than the wise men. It is the drama and intrigue that make this such a fascinating story.

The Christmas season doesn’t feel complete until we have heard the story of the Magi. Advent is a journey and the destination is not only the manger. Advent takes us to the child who then takes us beyond ourselves. Matthew tells this story so that we might remember that from the very beginning, God extended the circle of radical hospitality to everyone. We have domesticated this story by including it as an afterthought in our Christmas pageants. However, Mathew tells the story of the Jesus’ birth to new Christians, new followers of the Way. He could already see that this community of

believers was becoming too comfortable with themselves. They were not willing to see that the message was not only for them, but also for others.

Matthew shocks his readers from the first verse by including a rather scandalous genealogy. Traditionally a genealogy was traced through the male lineage, however Matthew includes four women in his list. As one writer reminds us, these were not just any women, however, these were four women who bore the scars of incest, prostitution, adultery and murder. By including these women in what may seem like a boring list of dead people, Matthew declares that what God intends to do through this child is completely beyond our expectations. Jesus will redeem those whom others have seen as unredeemable. It is what God intended from the beginning. When the magi arrive, they find the child not in a palace but in a simple home. They offer this child gifts fit for a king, gifts that would give his parents a glimpse of what was to become of their child.

The Magi are certainly unlikely visitors. We are not sure exactly what they were. We call them wise men but we don't know if they were philosophers or astrologers. King Herod knew nothing about the child's birth. He would soon take his murderous revenge on innocent male children because of his jealousy and insecurity, but he was told nothing about Jesus. First it was the shepherds and today it is this group of foreigners, ones that the town folks would have considered suspicious and unacceptable. These were odd men from a foreign land; the kind of folk people would have been warned to stay away from. When they find the child they are overwhelmed with joy. They lay down their gifts and they worship him. They know deep within there being what others have yet to discover. This child will change the world and they are among the privileged few that have been invited to witness his birth.

Jesus was sent into the world to create community with and save the least likely people. He came for all people, not just men, but women too. Not those who have it all together, but those who are wounded and confused and on the outside. He came to comfort the brokenhearted and to help the lost find their way home. He came not for those who have been healed, but for those who bear the scars of unmentionable human pain. Today I imagine the star coming to rest over a camp in the Sudan where a mother from Darfur has given birth to a child. In this child rests the hopes and fears of his people. This child is a promise not unlike the promise embodied in Jesus on that night long ago. I imagine somewhere in Iraq the star comes to rest on a simple home where a child is born. This child will live differently. She is the embodiment of peace. I imagine on this Epiphany day a child is born in a hospital in the United States to a woman too young to be having babies. Despite the challenges this mother faces, her child is a promise and a sign of hope. Things will be different for this child. This child will be the embodiment of light. This will happen because on a night many centuries ago God came into the world to be the embodiment of love and peace and hope and joy.

That is why the men fell to their knees and worshiped the child. They understood that because God had come to live among us, taken on flesh in the form of this tiny child, all things were possible. Their most honest response was to stand in awe of this mystery. When they had encountered the Holy One they were overwhelmed with joy. The gifts

they brought now seemed irrelevant. As they entered the home and saw the baby in his mother's arms they understood completely. Whatever God had revealed to them became clear in the face of this child. It is hard to imagine what it might have been like.

We don't have those kinds of experiences; at least not very often, those moments of unbridled joy. God hopes that when we come face to face with the Christ child we will respond as they did; with pure joy. So often we don't let ourselves fall into the joy of the moment. We hold back. We wonder what others will think if we respond with this kind of unmeasured gratitude. I hear the voice of my child saying, "Oh Mom, you're embarrassing me," You may hear another voice keeping you from just falling into this joy. People act as though expressing joy is somehow sinful. I am sure that is not what God intends.

Joy is one of the greatest gifts we can receive from God. It is greater than any gift the men presented to the child that day. We witness through them a moment of great joy. Jesus lived his life from a place of joy, welcoming others into his circle of love. When one who has been excluded is welcomed in, you feel this kind of joy. When you know you are accepted as a child of God despite being born differently from everyone else, no matter how you experience that "difference," you experience this kind of joy. When you find love in your life after moments of darkness, you experience this kind of joy; a joy that is written all over your face, the kind that makes you glow. God came to dwell among us so that we could have a personal, hands on, flesh-to-flesh experience of God. God came to dwell among us so that we too might know this joy.

When the Magi had visited the child the angels spoke to them and directed them to go home by another way. Filled with this joy and the assurance of safe travels, they departed. They had been transformed and life would never be the same. I pray that we will all leave this Epiphany day, transformed by the power of love, filled with this mysterious joy, to live as the shepherd and Magi did. To live our lives from this place of deep joy, never afraid to show others how much we love, never afraid to give thanks to God for God's overwhelming blessings, never afraid to be disciples of this life-giving Christ. May it be so. Amen