

Home by Another Way

Matthew 2:1-12

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes-
Some have gotten broken- and carrying them up into the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted - quite unsuccessfully -
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child [ren] who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are..."ⁱ

In his classic poem "For the Time Being," W.H. Auden captured this time of year all too well, didn't he? Here we all are, but Christmas isn't quite over yet. Yesterday, January 6 was the Epiphany, the end of the twelve days of Christmas as in the song, called Twelfth Night in Shakespeare's time, and called El Dia de los Tres Reyes in Spanish-speaking countries, the Day of the Three Kings. The Bible doesn't say they were kings, or that there were three of them. Because there were three gifts, people have guessed there were three of them. Because they were gifts fit for a king, they've been called kings. But who were they? They were Magi, Matthew's gospel tells us. It's the word that *magic* comes from.

Scholars tell us that "Originally, in Persia, Magi were dream-interpreters. By Jesus' time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers."ⁱⁱ

They were magicians, astrologers, pseudo-scientists, people who tried to find meaning in the stars. Think about people like Jean Dixon and other so-called psychics

who write horoscopes and claim to be able to predict the future, and you'll get an idea of how people in Jesus' time would have felt about the Magi.

You see, in the law of Moses, God forbid the Jews to use the sun and moon and stars for anything but giving light and telling the time of the day and the year. The penalty for breaking this law was death, so the Jews knew God would never use the stars to send a message. But here it is, Gentiles, foreigners, people who didn't even believe in their God, took to the road following a star to find their newborn king. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Magi went straight to Rome's puppet tyrant, Herod the Great, to ask him *of all people* if he knew where we might find the newborn boy who would be king of the Jews.

Herod had proclaimed himself the king of the Jews, and was given the title by Rome, even though he was a foreigner himself, an Idumean, and only half-Jewish. He was an apostate and a traitor in the eyes of the Pharisee and Zealot parties. He was a powerful and heartless man who stole from the people, tortured whole villages, assassinated his opponents without hesitation, and held daily executions of anyone he feared was a threat to his power, even his own wife and three sons, his closest friends, and several counselors who had once had his trust. The person that comes the closest to Herod in our world was probably Saddam Hussein.

You might ask, "If the Magi knew how to read the stars so well, why did they go to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem?" Probably they made the kind of assumption we would make, too. Would you expect to find a president in Tollhouse or in Fresno, in Washington or in some unknown little town in Virginia? Would you look for a king in a stable, or in a palace? It's common sense.

A mother of four young children learned something about common sense one Christmas:

...My proudest moment came during the children's Christmas pageant. My daughter was playing Mary, two of my sons were shepherds and my youngest son was a wise man. This was their moment to shine. My five-year-old Shepherd had practiced his line, "We found the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes." But he was nervous and said, "The baby was wrapped in wrinkled clothes."

My four-year-old "Mary" said, "That's not 'wrinkled clothes,' silly. That's dirty, rotten clothes." A wrestling match broke out between Mary and the

shepherd and was stopped by an angel, who bent her halo and lost her left wing.

I slouched a little lower in my seat when Mary dropped the doll representing Baby Jesus, and it bounced down the aisle crying, "Mama-mama." Mary grabbed the doll, wrapped it back up and held it tightly as the wise men arrived. My other son stepped forward wearing a bathrobe and a paper crown, knelt at the manger and announced, "We are the three wise men, and we are bringing gifts of gold, common sense and fur."

The congregation dissolved into laughter, and the pageant got a standing ovation. "I've never enjoyed a Christmas program as much as this one," Pastor Brian laughed, wiping tears from his eyes. "For the rest of my life, I'll never hear the Christmas story without thinking of gold, common sense and fur."^{iv}

It *is* true that the Magi brought common sense with them, along with their gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But *their* common sense – going to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem - almost got Jesus killed.

Herod consulted the priests and scribes to learn where God's chosen, the Messiah, would be born. They told him Bethlehem, only about six miles down the road from Jerusalem. Then Herod secretly asked the Magi when they first saw the new king's star, and, without thinking, they told him. "Bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage," he said. Somehow they failed to hear the jealous fear behind his words. They came close to betraying the very One they came to find.

The star guided them to the house, to the child and his mother. Overwhelmed with joy, they kneeled to pay him homage and opened the treasure chests we brought to pay him tribute - gifts fitting for a king. Gold, frankincense, to be burned on an altar to rise as fragrant prayers into the heavens; myrrh, to anoint, to perfume, to kill pain, to embalm. They were costly gifts, strange gifts for a child, but the tools of their trade.

But even though they were happy because they found the child they were looking for, their dreams were troubled by a warning. As they were led by a star, now they were led to see the lie in Herod's words. So they decided not to go back to Herod as he'd commanded them, but to go home by another road.

Joseph, too, was warned in a dream – by an angel, not to stay in Bethlehem, and not to return home the way he and Mary had come. Only by taking the child and fleeing to exile in Egypt did they save his life. The murderous Herod had all the boys under two

in Bethlehem slaughtered in a mad and useless attempt to keep the title of King of the Jews for himself.

On Christmas Eve I heard a song on the radio by James Taylor that I'd never heard before. It's called "Home By Another Way."

Those magic men the Magi
 Some people call them wise
 Or oriental, even kings
 Well anyway, those guys
 They visited with Jesus
 They sure enjoyed their stay
 Then warned in a dream of king Herod's scheme
 They went home by another way

Yes they went home by another way
 Home by another way
 Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
 And go home by another way
 We can make it another way
 Safe home as they used to say
 Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
 And go home another way

Steer clear of royal welcomes
 Avoid a big to-do
 A king who would slaughter the innocents
 Will not cut a deal for you
 He really, really wants those presents
 He'll comb your camels' fur
 Until his boys announce they've found trace amounts
 Of your frankincense, gold and myrrh

Time to go home by another way
 Home by another way
 You have to figure the odds saying play the odds
 And go home by another way
 We can make it another way
 Safe home as they used to say
 Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
 And go home another way

Home is where they want you now
 You can more or less assume that you'll be welcome
 in the end

Mustn't let king Herod haunt you so
Or fantasize his features when you're looking at a friend

Well it pleasures me to be here
And to sing this song tonight
They tell me that life is a miracle
And I figured that they're right
But Herod's always out there
He's got our cards on file
It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch
Old Herod likes to take a mile

Its best to go home by another way
Home by another way
We got this far to a lucky star
But tomorrow is another day
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way.^v

If we read between the lines of Matthew's story of the Magi, we can find another meaning in the words, "They went home by another way." The first Christians who followed Jesus weren't called Christians but followers of the Way. The Magi went home changed. They weren't the same people they were when they set out on the road to find Jesus. They didn't believe the same, and they were wiser now. They went home *in* another way, *to* another way of life. They found the king they were looking for but not looking for. They found out that their assumptions were all wrong. They found the king on God's terms, not their own. By what God revealed to them by the star and through the Hebrew Scriptures they found the King of the Jews, who was to be king of the Gentiles, their king, too. If God could show them, foreigners and unbelievers, the way to Jesus, then there's hope for all of us. There's hope for all peoples to find our way to Jesus.^{vi}

"There in Bethlehem, they opened their hearts and their minds and their eyes and they dared to see and hear and trust the in unimaginable and the unexpected. There in Bethlehem, they opened themselves to a different way and in so doing they found a different way home."^{vii}

The word *epiphany* means both the revealing of God's presence and a sudden leap of understanding. The Magi's Epiphany was both. Now they see and understand. They understand that this child born in a humble stable is not the contradiction he appears to be but the King of the Jews and much, much more. They understand who Herod is and what he's up to.

As Raleigh, North Carolina Pastor Nancy Petty puts it:

"...This story is our story. The events that happened in the lives of those first stargazers still occur in our lives today. We still show up in the wrong places looking for our salvation. We still allow our pre-conceived notions of how things are suppose to be to get in our way of discovering what is real and meaningful and truthful. We still believe that the important events in life occur among the wealthy and powerful and prestigious. Yes, much like the magi, our journeys take us through our own Jerusalem's and Bethlehem's as we search for the roads that will lead us home.^{viii}"

Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann contrasts Jerusalem with Bethlehem. One is the capital city with "great pretensions," the other a small village with "modest promises." Like the Magi, we have a choice. We can take the road back to Jerusalem or go home another way. We can go back to our old ways of doing things, back to the normal and predictable that will eventually destroy us, or we can choose to walk the way of innocence and hope that turns our expectations and our pretensions upside down.^{ix}

Going home by another way doesn't mean going to a place or a house. It's about who we are. It's the place where we belong, the place where we dream, the place where we find the center of our soul, our truth and purpose and meaning, the places where we are vulnerable, uncomfortable, fearful. In the community of faith, home is a place of peace, where spears are made into pruning hooks and swords are hammered into plowshares. Going home, we become, like the magi, people whose hearts and minds are open to what we never would have imagined, never would have expected before setting out on this journey.

Should we, like the Magi, pay attention to the warnings in our dreams and head home by another road, we just may find ourselves home again where we started, but changed, seeing and knowing it in a new way as home, and then we will be with the one who made us in the beginning.

It would be sadly ironic if, like the Magi, it is the “outsiders” who lead us to the place we, as God’s own people, have refused to go. The distance between Jerusalem and Bethlehem may only be a few miles geographically, but going home another way could be a lifetime adventure that will take us light years beyond our imaginations.^x

In a way all of us are exiles who can’t go home the way we came, and all of us are foreigners, strangers in a strange land.

A pastor presided at a wedding for...

“a couple who requested [the story of the Magi] from Matthew as their wedding [Scripture]. It was an odd choice for an April wedding, but they said there was something about the Magi's "heading home by another way" that struck a deep chord. Theirs had been a relationship established on difficult circumstances and regrettable choices. They needed redemption, which brought them to church. "Home" represented not the place they needed to return to though; but a place they needed to get to. And they realized that getting there would require going some other way than the way they'd been traveling.

This "other way" ended up as a humbling encounter with God and his grace. Christians know it as the way of the cross; a way that contradicts every human assumption about home and grace, as well as about lost and found, about weakness and strength, about leastness and greatness, about first and last, about death and life. ...The cross does not reward you if you're good, but precisely because you're not...

“Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Christianity who died at Auschwitz, wrote that ‘...The way from Bethlehem leads inevitably to Golgotha, from the crib to the cross. ...The star of Bethlehem shines in the night of sin. The shadow of the Cross falls on the light that shines from the crib. ...The way of the incarnate Son of God leads through the Cross and Passion to the glory of the Resurrection. In His company the way of every one of us, indeed of all humanity, leads through suffering and death to this same glorious [home].’

“The couple [the pastor] married wanted their wedding ... loud and rocking and celebratory: ‘rejoicing with exceeding great joy.’ They hired [the church’s] entire band. Most of their guests weren't regular churchgoers or even religious; "practical pagans" who had likely never been to a wedding with a drumbeat and certainly not one where they had to stand and sing happy clapping 'we love Jesus' songs. [The pastor] asked the couple, didn't they feel weird about forcing Jesus on their, you know, heathen friends? Not at all, they said, they'll love it. And they did.”^{xi}

ⁱW.H. Auden, "For the Time Being," in *Collected Longer Poems*, 195.

ⁱⁱ Stoffregen, By Brian P., "Exegetical notes on texts from the Revised Common Lectionary" CrossMarks, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (PA)

<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt2x1.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Roger Karban, "Understanding Faith," *The Evangelist*, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany (NY)

^{iv}From an E-mail from CJMohan@aol.com 14 Feb 2005

^v http://www.lyricsfreak.com/j/james+taylor/home+by+another+way_20069229.html

^{vi} Stoffregen, By Brian P., "Exegetical notes on texts from the Revised Common Lectionary" CrossMarks, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (PA)

<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt2x1.htm>

^{vii} Petty, Nancy E., "Going Home By Another Road." Pullen Memorial Baptist Church January 5, 2003.

<http://www.pullen.org/pubs/Sermons/s010503.htm>

^{viii} Petty, Nancy E., "Going Home By Another Road." Pullen Memorial Baptist Church January 5, 2003.

<http://www.pullen.org/pubs/Sermons/s010503.htm>

^{ix} Cited in Petty, Nancy E., "Going Home By Another Road." Pullen Memorial Baptist Church January 5, 2003. <http://www.pullen.org/pubs/Sermons/s010503.htm>

^x Cf. Petty, Nancy E., "Going Home By Another Road." Pullen Memorial Baptist Church January 5, 2003. <http://www.pullen.org/pubs/Sermons/s010503.htm>

^{xi} Harrell, Daniel, "Home by Another Road", Park Street Church, Boston. December 25, 2005

<http://www.parkstreet.org/pulpit/dh04/dh122505.shtml>