

# Another Road Home

Matthew 2:1-12

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(Epiphany)

By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

I hope everyone's New Year is off to a great start. Have you considered whether you are living the life you want? And perhaps you've even implemented a few resolutions to get yourself back on track? Well, I have good news for you. The sermon series, as we begin the New Year, is going to be looking at several of the call narratives in the Bible. We are going to ask ourselves the questions: What is God calling us to this year? What changes might the Lord be interested in implementing our lives? What is God calling you to do, be, or become this year? Today we have a chance to consider the Magi of the Christmas story in Matthew's Gospel.

This is the twelfth day after Christmas! It is one of the six great feast days of the Church, known as Epiphany, because we celebrate God's revelation. A heavenly light shines to show us the way, and it shines most brilliantly upon Christ — the light of the world. You know the story of the three kings of Orient, who come to Bethlehem led by a heavenly star, with treasures of gold, frankincense and myrrh they present to the baby king. Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar were the first Gentiles (non-Jews) to see the light and recognize Jesus as the light of the world. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples to “. . . go, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; teaching them all that I have commanded you, and I will be with you to the end.” This good news is for everyone, everywhere!

Actually, Matthew doesn't really say how many Magi there were. Magi are astrologers, early scientists, who watched the natural world closely and especially the heavens for signs and movements. Our word “magic” comes from the same root as magi. But they weren't so much magicians as astrologers. Long before GPS and satellites, the heavens provided direction for those at sea and those traveling in darkness. Imagine these travelers with a GPS making their way to a convention in Jerusalem and suddenly the nice feminine voice

says, "Recalculating. Turn south and follow the road." And when they looked ahead on the map it was leading them to Bethlehem instead.

The Magi followed a distant star. What star are you following? What direction is your life taking? What goal is before you that draws you forward? Is it graduating from school? Is it getting into the college you want? Is it becoming a better person? Is it becoming more popular, or more successful, or more financially secure? Is it becoming thinner, or healthier, or maybe more loving and less selfish? Here's the question we may need to ask ourselves: What do you think God wants you to do this year? Are you open to the ways in which the Lord might be re-directing you towards a different road? Faith is a journey following the light to Christ. Where is the Lord leading you, and are you, like the Magi, willing to be re-directed?

I chose to follow a distant star when I was in high school. It has taken me all over the nation and to several foreign countries. My four siblings chose to remain closer to home in the Midwest. I have friends from Africa and Asia, from Brazil and Puerto Rico, from Mexico, Thailand and Taiwan, Spain and Germany. I've studied in institutions of learning, attending three graduate schools in three different regions of the country. It all began with a simple question for me while I was in high school. The Lord simply asked, "Will you follow me?" I realize what a great adventure it has been to say, "Yes! I will follow where you lead me." It's that simple. Every year and every day we get to decide who is on the throne in our life, and to whom we will pay homage.

The invitation is there for us all, as it was for the Magi. We must be open to receiving the invitation and we will have to learn to be re-directed. Do you trust that the Lord God has a better plan for your life than you do? Are you open to being re-directed this year towards something more important and more satisfying than looking better, or beating the competition in school or in sales? What star are you following? Is it the star that God wants you to follow, the goal that God wants you to pursue? Or is it just something the world has told you that you ought to value, like being skinny, or being successful? God wants more for your life than that – and so do you! Nothing wrong with success and being

healthy but it isn't enough to secure your life, to give you ultimate meaning and purpose. God wants you to flourish! Ever notice in these stories how people are "overwhelmed with joy!" When was the last time you were overwhelmed with joy?

There is an invitation today, but there is also a warning. "Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." At the very beginning of the life of Jesus, there is a dark threat to all that he represents and stands for. Herod sees himself as King of the Jews and will tolerate no rival. He pretends to want to worship the true king but secretly wants to find out where his rival will be born so he can eliminate him, and secure his own desire, his own need to be self-important, to be successful and in control. Herod has a careful eye out for his own survival, and so do we. Which is the real king? Whom will you serve? Jesus Christ or your own survival most of all? Who really is the ruler of your life?

I don't mean to set us all up for a guilt trip today as we begin another year. I don't want to suggest that doing well in school or seeking to be successful is wrong. Not in the least. But there is a way of pursuing our own interests that leads us down the wrong road, away from the light and into greater darkness, when we are selfishly attempting to control our own destiny rather than opening ourselves to what God wants us to do and become. Your character matters! No matter what age you are, or what season of life you are in, the quality of your character, your courage, honesty, and generosity, all matter.

The Magi returned to their homes by a different road, not only because there was danger in going back the same way from Herod, they went home a different route because they had been changed. Sometimes the Lord leads us forward by sending us back home as changed individuals. We have no gold or frankincense or myrrh to bring, but we can bring ourselves, and we can give ourselves over to this mystery of God who is present with us, this mystery which came into the world at Christmas, in Jesus Christ.

There is a warning in this text: to avoid that which threatens this new ruler. What threatens all that God wants you to do or become this year? Maybe it's your own insecurity. You

may never really start on the journey because you don't believe you can make it. You give up before you ever begin.

Or maybe you are just incredibly selfish and self-centered. Maybe the threat to becoming what God wants of you is that you have your own agenda, your own ambitions and you don't really care what God might want. You are going to excel and be the most successful athlete, student, actor, singer, banker, mother, realtor . . . whatever. If God isn't helping you become who you want to be, what good is God in your life? Now who is really on the throne there? Maybe, like Herod, you want to be the ruler of your own life and the lives of others. You might want to re-think that one.

Maybe the threat to what God wants to do in your life is your own addictions and compulsions. Maybe something is out of control in your life: your eating or drinking, or sexual compulsions. Maybe you're addicted to self-pity or hopelessness. You may prefer blaming everyone else for what goes wrong in your life. It's your parent's fault. You didn't have enough love or encouragement or opportunity or inheritance. Maybe it's your husband's or wife's fault, or your boss, or your teacher, or whoever you can blame. They are the reason your life isn't turning out right. Sometimes we learn to survive by developing unhealthy ways of living in the world. We have to be willing to be redirected by the Lord; to learn to think differently, to act differently; to follow a different star that leads to a better place.

This might be the year that God wants you to become less stingy and self-centered and more generous and more giving. This might be the year God wants you to not be so set in your ways, so certain that nothing really changes, so bored with living. This might be the year the Lord wants to redirect your ambitions towards more significant aims than your own comfort and security. This might be the year you stand up for justice for others and move from neutrality to actively building a better world. Be careful to avoid the threats to what the Lord wants to do in and through you. Jesus Christ can show you the way but you have to trust him and be willing and open to following him.

The Magi followed a distant star and discovered the Lord of Life, and it brought them overwhelming joy. They returned home by a different road because they were changed by that encounter. We are invited to discover that same Lord and follow him into this New Year. However we are also warned not to go home unchanged, but to take a different road.

In the northern parts of the country they say there are two seasons: winter and road construction. In the Canadian wilderness, there is a road through the tundra that freezes and thaws with the change of seasons. In the summer, when it is warm the ground turns to mud and vehicles traveling along the road create deep ruts that are impossible to avoid. Then (inevitably) the weather turns cold and those ruts freeze and become permanent until the next summer thaw. At the beginning of the road there is a sign that reads, "Be careful which ruts you choose to drive in, because you will be in them for the next 20 miles." Life can sometimes feel like that road in the wilderness. We get stuck in ruts we had no intention of living in. Be careful what ruts you choose — because you will be in them for the next year.

So break the pattern and follow a distant star this year. You might just find yourself discovering the Lord of life yourself, and be changed, by changing roads, in the process.