

Journey

The wise men came to worship the Christ child, the Bible tells us in Matthew 2:12, and then they returned home “by another way.” And that makes me wonder, did they want to journey home by a different road, or would they have preferred to follow the tried & true route? And how about us... as we begin the New Year, 2015, do we want to stick with the familiar path, or do we want to set out in a new direction? ... but I’m getting ahead of myself.

Let’s look more closely at today’s scripture lesson. Can you imagine what it must have been like for the wise men? These were men of learning in a distant, foreign country. Their home was over a thousand miles east of Jerusalem, probably in the country of Persia (which is Iran today). Year after year, they studied the stars, looking for signs which would help them understand events on earth. So they were amazed when they discovered the birth of a new star, which signified the birth of a new king. Not just any king, but the greatest king of all time. Where was he to be born? According to the stars, he was to be born in Judea, one of the smallest, poorest, most insignificant countries on earth. How could this be? The wise men had so many questions... so they began to plan for a journey, a long & dangerous trip to Judea, to discover the truth for themselves. They wanted to see this newborn king, to kneel before him, and to bring him gifts.

After many months of travel, their caravan at last reached Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. They went to the palace of the king, King Herod, expecting that this was where they would find the child who would grow up to rule the world. Imagine their shock, when they discovered that no one knew anything about a young heir to the throne. In fact, King Herod was obviously alarmed to think that a new king might try to overthrow him, taking away his power & privilege. He assembled all the religious leaders to search the ancient prophesies, to discover where to find the baby. The answer was found in the writings of the prophet Micah (5:2): “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.”

So, King Herod sent the wise men on to Bethlehem, with strict orders that they were to return to him and report on the whereabouts of the future king. As the wise men left Herod's palace, they once again saw the brilliant star in the sky, and they followed it—not very far now, just over 5 miles. It seemed to be shining straight down on one particular house... they knocked on the door... and inside... there was the child with his mother, Mary. They knew, knew, that they had found the baby they had been seeking—the King of all the world. Their hearts were filled with joy... with a sense of peace greater than they had ever known... with a love deeper than they had ever experienced. The wise men knelt to worship the baby Jesus; they opened their treasure chests with gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

That night, as they were sleeping, they had a dream—and this dream needed no interpretation. It was a message from God, that they were not to return to King Herod with his jealousy and his evil plans to destroy the baby, but instead they were to journey home by another route. The wise men listened to God, and they left quickly for home, before Herod and his spies could find them.

But I wonder, did they wish they could have returned home on the old familiar trade routes they were accustomed to? Or, were they happy for God's change in plans?

Perhaps, the wise men welcomed the change. They knew the danger that Herod posed; they wanted to avoid him at all costs. But it was more than that. Finding the baby Jesus, holding him in their arms, had changed their lives completely. They had discovered the source of Truth and Love. Nothing would be the same again. They welcomed new travels, new people to tell their story to, new places to share the message of the baby, born to be Savior & King

And now, 2000 years later, how is it for us? At Christmas, we have journeyed to Bethlehem and found the baby lying in a manger: Jesus, God's Son, our Savior. And now, God directs us to continue our journey by a different route.

Perhaps, we welcome change in our lives. As we look toward the New Year 2015, we think about all the things that we want to let go of from the past: our sins, the ways we hurt other people, destructive habits, patterns of addiction, our lack of trust in God.

By ourselves alone, by our own strength & willpower, a change would not be possible. But we don't need to do it alone. God has sent his Son to be our Savior. In Jesus, our sins are forgiven. We can begin again—a fresh start, a clean slate. We are given the strength and grace to travel this new path in life, because Jesus walks beside us.

And this is the meaning of Holy Communion. When we receive the bread and the cup, we remember Christ's broken body and outpoured blood, his death on the cross for us—that our sins are washed away, that we can begin again to be the person that God created us to be. We can continue on our life's journey, following a new path of life with Christ.

However, when I think of the wise men, there's a 2nd possibility: I wonder if perhaps they wished that it would have been safe to follow the well-worn path to home. With God directing them to take another route, they were leaving the familiar behind. The maps & charts which had gotten them safely to Judea were useless now. They didn't know what dangers they would encounter on these new roads. They had no friends or acquaintances in the foreign cities where their journey would now take them. Oh, if only they could return the way they had come!

And 2000 years later, perhaps we can relate to these feelings. We know that the coming year will bring new paths, new opportunities, new challenges... maybe with our family, with our friendships, at school, at work, in retirement... No matter what the specifics, we realize that we will be continuing our life's journey by another route. What will help us?

This, too, is the meaning of Holy Communion. Jesus died on the cross for our sins; then 3 days later, God raised Jesus to new life on Easter morning. Now he is with us always, walking by our side. When we come to

the Communion table, we recognize his presence with us... we feel his love surrounding us. We find ourselves fed & strengthened by his grace. We do not walk the paths of life alone, Christ walks with us.

So come, come join in this Sacrament of Holy Communion, and be blessed with God's gifts of forgiveness, healing, strength, and peace in Jesus Christ, as you look ahead toward your life's journey in 2015. Amen.