

# Other Roads

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Sunday, January 06, 2019

Scripture: [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

## Intro to the Scripture

Today is Epiphany, always celebrated on January 6th, this time on a Sunday... So, we're actually going to hear a repeat of one of the later readings from Christmas Eve. Then, we like to emphasize the star that leads the wise ones, or Magi, to take a journey to find where Jesus will be born. And, because we like to sing songs of the star and the gifts they bring, we collapse time a little to make it all fit on Christmas Eve... even though this feast of the Epiphany is often called "Three Kings Day" in other Christian contexts, letting us know that it took the wise ones a while to get there.

Today, just as much as I think we need to listen for the way in which the wise ones are called to the side of the manger, we should be equally attentive to the "great hereafter" that takes place after they arrive, and after they bestow their treasures on the new-born baby.

## Sermon

It's always buried in the last line of the text, but I always think that this reading from the Gospel of Matthew could be one of the most important texts for us as Christians right now, because I think it asks us to imagine the stage our faith is played out on as just a little bit larger.

The Gospel of Matthew tells the story of Jesus from a certain perspective in history and faith. Above all else, Matthew wants to make sure we understand that Isaiah 60 is coming true: the nations are streaming to Israel (Jesus) to bow down and open their treasure chests and deliver gifts of gold and frankincense. Isaiah's prophetic writings are being confirmed, and so God is acting in a new way, and salvation is on the move in the world. Israel, so long oppressed and ignored, will be honored by other nations... Later on will come the adaptation that Jesus is good news to all nations.

Matthew exists in a time and a framework of Jewish belief in which faith identities and national identities are strongly linked: to be Jewish is to be of Israel, to know God's salvation is to know the restoration of Israel. Perhaps largely because Jews (and the Jewish followers of Jesus... there aren't any "Christians" yet) are a minority faith in a complex marketplace of identities within the Roman Empire, so securing and solidifying that identity against any other is essential to survival. Over and over again, Matthew returns to the words of the prophets to show us that Jesus is fulfilling this vision of theo-political healing to offer hope to *this* people on the edge of their world.

We don't know much about this, as Christians in the west. For about 1500 years we have had the privilege of having our faith be the center of our window to the world. Religious art was Christian art, theology was Christian theology. Our images of God, our language of God has been the absolute center of our world as far as we were concerned.

This has changed, however, and it has changed fast... as people leave Christian traditions, as we gather new faiths around us in our civil society... we have quickly found ourselves back in the marketplace. Even more, we find ourselves needing to discover how we will have encounter and connection with people of diverse faith backgrounds in dialogue and partnership.

See, it's the "after" moment of this story that has so much to teach us in this time and place in our culture. *We* live in a time where religious and national identities are diverse and blended. And so I think today, rather than looking at Jesus, we need to look at the Magi.

The wise ones, the Magi — the ones from away see something in a star that might hint at what God is doing in Jesus, and they come to pay homage...

These wise ones, no matter the faith they proclaimed, traveled far and wide... and even asked directions, which we know doesn't come easy... so they could come and share gifts and recognize the holiness of a child, even a child of another tradition.

but they do not stay (Mary and Joseph really didn't need houseguests), they do not become Jewish. They return to their homes... changed, but they return, we do not hear of them converting others to a particular faith... (though later church traditions would try and assert they did.) They went home, secure in their faith, but changed, traveling "another road" having seen the Christ child and eluding the power of the kings of that time.

Their remarkable journey which we remember particularly in this season of incarnation of our particular claim that God comes to live in human form... invites us to reflect on how we will honor and encounter people who walk these "other roads" of life and faith. How we come and see the holy in another... and then return to our own faith... but maybe changed.

We can forget the danger that is here. Our reading ended safely and mysteriously, but one of the reasons the wise ones travel home by that "other road" is to steer clear of the swath of blood cut through Judea by Herod in response to news of Jesus's birth. Before this story ends, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus will flee to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of children that Herod will decree in a vain attempt to secure his dominance. (We don't talk about that so much.)

Thus always with tyrants: afraid of children, and the hope they can bring to an oppressed people. Thus always with tyrants: afraid of what might happen when subjects they have so neatly divided by class or economics, race, or creed... find common cause for praise and action that might lead us all to freedom.

Last week I mentioned the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, a contemplative monk whose writing I love... the beautiful thing about him was that he was a contemplative who absolutely could not keep himself out of the world. And so it was he made a friend... another monk, Thich Naht Hahn, and so it

was that Thich Naht Hahn inspired another friend, a pastor named Martin Luther King... we forget that in the midst of the upheaval of the Vietnam War there was a profound connection across traditions... wise ones gathering and sharing in common cause for peace.

We should do the same.

We should worship and give thanks for what God has done in Jesus Christ. We should sing our songs, and read our readings. We should contemplate the mystic night in a stable, the hard glaring truth of the evil of a Roman cross, and how it is all shattered by a quiet morning and a stone rolled away from a tomb.

We should practice breaking bread and sharing a cup here in communion with each other, experiencing Jesus's welcome and nourishment of the Spirit, so that when we go out into the world, our hands just fall open in sharing... as natural as breathing.

We should take our scriptures seriously. Seriously enough to critique readings of scripture which ask us to believe that the Jesus who welcomed one and all to the feast, who was honored by foreign mystics of another faith at his birth, who healed and freed people across every division would suddenly become a cosmic bouncer rejecting all those who did not know him or name him as his Jewish followers did. I'm thinking of that famous phrase "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life..."

Our General Minister and President, John Dorhauer reminded me a few years ago, there are no articles in this Greek... Jesus says: "I am Way, Truth, and Life..." Not because he is walling off the holy, but because he is showing us how to live, be true, and walk a way to the holy.

We should, as the wise ones, honor the holiness we find in our neighbors and strangers, people we meet "on the way."

We should above all take seriously our theological assertion that God created everything that is in goodness. That in Christ, God invites us to understand that holiness lives within all human form and lives, and deserves our honor and our gifts wherever we may find it, and we should expect that encounters with this holiness: in other people, other traditions, other cultures **will change us** and lead us in new paths and roads of faith and discovery.

So, let us be wise, growing in our faith, and traveling alongside others' so we might even more fully know God's grace and God's peace breaking into the world. Amen.