

“...by another road”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, January 5, 2020
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Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chest, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country **by another road.** Matthew 2:1-12

Will you pray with me. Star rising God, shine your light on us this new day. Lead us not into temptation and distraction from your wisdom, but maybe down a new path... by another road. Help us to discern our best course in the days to come. Teach us to not be afraid of the dark and the unknown, but to be star seekers. Amen.

One of the scholarly commentators of the Gospel of Matthew, who also happened to be my Greek professor in seminary, Doug Hare, writes this about our passage from Matthew for this morning: “Matthew’s sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence. Our task... is to seek a deeper understanding of the story through study of its narrative details without losing our wonderment at the story as a whole.”¹

It is an incredible story, isn’t it? No speaking parts by Joseph or Mary or even a gurgle from the baby Jesus. Just a scared King Herod who’s afraid this baby is going to overthrow him. A few – we don’t really know how many – wise seekers are after the

¹Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 12.

same baby who, God only knows why, has some star power beckoning them to find him. They DO find him when the blessed star stops right over the spot where Jesus is laying next to his mother.

These seekers are stopped in their tracks and overwhelmed with joy – to the point they can't help themselves but give him gifts. Don't you just wonder what Mary thought about all this? And where was Joseph? He must have been out watering the camels or something. He is mentioned in the next verse after our passage ends for this morning and receives an important message in a dream. "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.'" (Matt 2:13) Matthew loves to have important messages come to people in dreams in his Gospel!

It's easy to get bogged down in the details of this whole story and lose the gist of the message, as my Greek professor Doug Hare suggests. I've been trying to envision something in our lives today with which to compare it.

Have you ever started out on an adventure or down a new path in your life, not having a clue how it was going to work out? I have... several times – the most dramatic being my move into ministry. I didn't have any idea where I was going to end up or what I was going to be doing when I entered seminary in 1995. I just knew I had to do it. And here I am with all of you!

It seems to me one of the lessons we can take from the story of the kings, or magi, or whoever they were, seeking out the baby Jesus by following a star... is that *faith is about taking risks*. Whether we talk about faith in God, or faith in ourselves, each day we take risks. Sometimes those risks are not so major. But other times they lead to unexpected epiphanies that are life changing.

This is the Sunday designated as Epiphany Sunday in the Christian calendar. An epiphany in the Christian sense is:

"the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ... celebrated on January 6th (which isn't a Sunday this year), or a moment of sudden revelation or insight, or a manifestation of a divine or supernatural being."

Epiphanies are those moments when we say, "NOW, I see!" or "Oh, THAT'S what that means!" or "You mean there IS something beyond ME?" Our story for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew tells us of wise men, usually thought to be three of them, who experienced an epiphany – a sudden realization that they were in the presence of the divine and that the prophecies of old just might be coming true – that a child had been born with amazing, unusual and incredible star power.

But even though the realization was sudden, what lead up to it wasn't. These fellows weren't just out wandering around without a thought in their heads. One commentator of the story writes, "They had been studying. They knew their history. They hadn't merely stumbled onto this momentous event. They had searched their own past and their sacred texts, and the result of their study was a readiness, or at least a willingness, to recognize the sign when it appeared.

These scholarly folk did not keep their noses in the books all the time. They also were keen observers of the world around them. Without those two characteristics,

knowing the prophecies and being observant of their contemporary world, the Epiphany might well have been missed by these figures around whom so much mystery, hymnody, and inventive detail have been created. [“We three kings of Orient, are... “ don’t you know?]

They were willing to seek confirmation of what they had learned and seen... They took a chance on being proven wrong – or right! They were willing to ask for directions along the way, even if they were wrong in their choice of resources (meaning crazy King Herod).

Having found the confirmation of their convictions – seeing the child with Mary – they responded with all the gratitude they could muster. And after seeing the child and having all their hopes realized, they still remained vigilant and attentive – open to further visions and insight – and thus they were responsive to their dream-delivered warning to go home **by another road.**²

You see, it seems to me, it’s like this – once you understand Jesus is not just another itinerant preacher or politician spouting crowd pleasing platitudes... or a magician pulling rabbits out of a holy hat... you can’t go back.

You can’t live your life as you did before.

You can’t hide behind excuses about why you’re unable to take risks in serving others.

You can’t move into the future looking back to a time when you thought you were safe and secure.

You have to go forward knowing there are plans for you, whether you ever profess to being religious or not. Once you see that Jesus is demonstrating a new way to live you just have to go on “by another road.” (Matt 2:12) The old road isn’t taking you to good places anymore. I certainly experienced that when I made the decision I had to go to seminary. You have to get a new life map, or at the very least take a different road on your holy GPS unit.

Once you have this epiphany, this moment of sudden holy revelation or insight, you realize the truth of the person within your internal GPS unit who guides you to your destination. “Re-cal-u-lating,” he or she says, when you’ve made a wrong turn. And yes, sometimes, there are lots of recalculations that need to be made before you find yourself on the road that’s right for you.

I read the words awhile back of someone not a Christian, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, that add another dimension to this challenge. He said, “People take different roads seeking fulfillment and happiness. Just because they’re not on your road doesn’t mean they’ve gotten lost.”³

As people of faith, followers of the way of Jesus, we keep searching... We can never know what new epiphany is waiting to surprise us down the road.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

²William V. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, p. 214, 216.

³auto-sender@gratefulness.org, sent Sunday, January 1, 2012

Called to Gift **Weekly Prayer** Ever-faithful God, through prophets and angels you promised to raise up a holy child who would establish a household of peace and justice. Open our hearts to receive your Son, that we may open our doors to welcome all people as sisters and brothers, and establish your household in our time. Amen.

All Readings For This Sunday Isaiah 61:10-62:3 Psalm 148 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:22-40

Focus Reading Luke 2:22-40 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Focus Questions

1. How important are religious rituals and commitments in your life?
2. How would you define the word, "blessing"?

3. How often do we hear that politics have no place in church? What do we mean by that?
4. How would it transform our relationships, our churches, our families, our nation, the world if we saw the potential in each person as a gift of God who has a role in the unfolding of God's promises in our midst?
5. What is God's dream for the world? What is your place in that dream?

Reflection by Kathryn Matthews Huey. The shepherds, the angels and the heavenly hosts are all gone now, and Joseph and Mary have a baby to raise. As devout Jews, they took him first for circumcision and naming and now, after the appropriate time has passed, they've come to the temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification and Jesus' presentation as a firstborn male to be consecrated to God. Jerusalem and the temple are significant throughout Luke's Gospel, and it's important to Luke that Jesus is seen as one who was raised in faithful observance of Jewish law. He makes that point in today's reading; in fact, while Luke uses the word "law" nine times in his Gospel, five of them are found in this passage. Jesus was raised in full obedience to the Law of Moses, within a religious tradition, says Alan Culpepper, that praises and honors God in all of life, when you rise up and when you lie down, in your going out and your coming in, in the way you dress and what you eat. And Fred Craddock has observed, "Later in life Jesus would be in tension with some interpreters of his tradition, but his position would not be that of an outsider." Culpepper has observed that this ceremony of presentation expresses Mary and Joseph's "deepest awarenesses and commitments." They "saw God at work in events they had experienced. They lived within a covenant community and they sought to fulfill vows they had made as well as to introduce their son into that covenant community." This Holy Family, then, is devout and observant. And they are poor, so their offering is simple, just two turtledoves instead of a lamb. But they also offer, or present, their child, Jesus, who would later be called a "lamb." In the temple, at least in the outer court where women were allowed, they encounter two old saints who represent, in Fred Craddock's words, "Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises." They embody what have been called "the wonders of waiting," an art lost to us today. It is to this covenant community that Mary and Joseph introduce Jesus. Perhaps Mary's first amazement was that Simeon addressed her at all, since it was unusual for men to talk with women they didn't know, especially in public. (Won't this be

exactly the sort of thing that will get Jesus into trouble one day?) Luke tells us that Simeon has been assured by the Holy Spirit that he won't die until he sees the Messiah, so he clearly has some power backing him up. Sure enough, when the big moment arrives, Simeon has the insight, the gift of recognizing what he has been waiting for all along. What he holds may be "just" a baby, but he sees the salvation of God, glory for the people of Israel and light for the gentiles, not just long ago but today, not just for himself and his people, but for all people, all the children of God. [L L L L] [SEP SEP] God comes down as tender love. [L L L L] [SEP SEP] James C. Howell writes evocatively of this scene: "How lovely, how tender, the way aged Simeon, the frailties of his years draped over him, cradles the infant Jesus in his arms. Imagine holding in your arms this most wanted child, the hope of the ages, the yearning of your entire life." Ironically, God didn't come down as a powerful emperor or a rich man: "God came down," Howell writes, "not to thrash evildoers or crush the Romans, but as an infant, to elicit love, to nurture tenderness." Like Mary and Zechariah before him, Simeon breaks into a beautiful song, praising God and asking to be released now from his duty as watchman ("like Habakkuk before him," William Herzog writes, "standing at his post, keeping watch and waiting for the Lord"); he asks to be released from his waiting for the "consolation of Israel," for he has beheld it before his very eyes. He can now die in peace, a peace that Stephen Farris describes as "wholeness or 'shalom.'" [L L L L] [SEP SEP] Wasn't it a recent president who had a problem with "the vision thing"? Didn't we know that that didn't mean eyesight but something more, something deeper and much more powerful? I once had a conversation about the vision thing with a colleague who had lost his eyesight many years before. We talked about this reading, about the ability of Simeon to see more than a baby in his arms, to see within and beyond this baby to God's hand at work in the world. [L L L L] [SEP SEP] My colleague said that his own inability to see with his eyes is sometimes a gift because it enables him not to be distracted by things that might keep him from seeing "to the heart of things." Whenever he would say that something was "gorgeous," I wondered how he knew that, but he explained that his heart sees what his eyes cannot. He says that he sees the beauty of creation--instead of ugliness--because he can only see with his heart, his soul, and his mind. Most of all, he tries to see to the heart of each person he encounters, so the things that matter to the world matter very little to him. He looks, instead, within the person, to the Christ within. He believes that we're each called to see, to behold, the promise of God's grace and the Christ in one another, which helps us to understand better Jesus' teachings about things like loving our enemies and having the reign of God within

us. [SEP:SEP]"The vision thing"[SEP:SEP]As it turns out, Luke often uses "sight" in his Gospel as a metaphor for perceiving the Word of God, for "getting it" when it comes to faith. So this Simeon is a good example for us of someone who sees with his heart and soul and mind; it's as if he stood there and felt the presence of God's promise about to be fulfilled. He was open, as we should be, to what is yet to come. Of course, Simeon also "sees" beyond the beautiful baby to a shadow side, to the opposition that Jesus will experience, a division that will cut like a sword through the heart of Mary. Fred Craddock says this beautifully: "Jesus will bring truth to light and in so doing throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision. In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, result. Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one's life, toward or away from God." Preachers, take note that "anyone who turns on light creates shadows. This is what is meant literally by 'making a difference,' and it is this reality which causes many to take up the task of preaching with great hesitation; after all, who would casually become an accessory in the radical alteration of the lives of others?" But James Howell draws an important if subtle distinction between the way the world sees things, and the way of the gospel: "Notice the order," he writes. "In the world, it's rise and fall. The rise and fall of the Third Reich, the rise and fall of the business tycoon, the rise and fall of a movie star. But with Jesus it's fall and rise...We fall, and from that lowest point, we rise." [SEP:SEP]Anna, too, has the gift of seeing, of recognizing God's hand at work doing not so much a new thing but keeping an old promise in a new day. We may not get to hear her words directly but we hear that she went around praising God and telling everyone all about the great thing God was doing in their midst, the great thing she had waited for so faithfully. (It's interesting that Simeon addresses the couple, but Anna goes out and spreads the good news, even at her age.) Even as she's "ready to move offstage," Fred Craddock says, she knows that the new thing God is doing "is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God keeping an old promise." However, like Simeon, Anna understands what a blessing is, and it has been the central hope of her life, the focus of her heart: "God's blessing," James Howell writes, "was not a continual smorgasbord of titanic experiences and shiny baubles. God's blessing was just one thing, and it was eighty years coming." [SEP:SEP]What do you think about this vision thing, this thing of seeing within and beyond, of seeing with our hearts and souls and minds? Think for a moment about our hope for God's reign to be experienced right here, in our midst, all around us, about our deepest longing when we are poor, or oppressed and marginalized, excluded and pushed around, when we're

sick and suffering, when we're depressed and downcast, when our hearts are grieving or weary and we think we can't go on, not one more mile, maybe not one more step, and then, in a moment, we are lifted up, strengthened, healed, loved, accepted, chosen. This can happen in the most amazing ways. I remember a story on TV several Christmases ago about a young boy who had been diagnosed with cancer and was given a grant by the Make-a-Wish Foundation to make his wish come true. He decided instead to see a different vision of what he could do with his time and energy and this monetary gift, and decided to create a foundation himself to give toys to other children who had cancer. When other people heard about it, they sent lots of donations. And there he was, on the TV screen, taking the toys and carrying good news and comfort and healing, to young, hurting people whose pain he understood and whose needs he saw with a vision far greater than most. God's concern for all of life. Like Simeon and Anna, like this young boy, we can speak out the good news, not just for ourselves, but for every one of God's children. Like Simeon and Anna, we can see beyond what's right before our eyes to the future unfolding of God's plan, to the promises of God being fulfilled here and now, and in the days ahead. They looked at a baby, and saw grace and hope. While we've been inspired and blessed by the songs of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon, they're about more than what happens in church, during our religious observances. Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan devote a chapter of their excellent book, *The First Christmas*, to these songs about the fulfillment of our hope: "These hymns proclaim and remind us that the God of the Bible is concerned about the whole of life....this language is about how the world should be." For Crossan and Borg, these hymns from the Bible "combine what we often separate, namely, religion and politics, spirituality and a passion for this world," and they recognize that Jesus "decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets--the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the world of domination and empire." Whether we are Simeon and Anna long ago, or the people of God today, we recognize with our hearts "the one who reveals God's dream for this world." What would it mean for the United Church of Christ to recognize the newborn baby as "the one who reveals God's dream for this world"? Perhaps we see only the baby right now, and we need to be able to dream of what is yet to come. Think about our children's children, the ones who will someday come the doors of our churches, long after we have gone to rest in the arms of God. We are their ancestors, and they are our heirs. Those heirs of ours will look back and hear the story of how we, in these

days long ago, dreamed of them and built up this great church to be a place of warm and open welcome, a place of justice and love, a place where we all move over and make room for every single person, a place that can be a home where we sincerely tell each new person, "We've been waiting for you." These are uncertain, even scary times, here on the brink of a new year. Alas, our church's extravagant hospitality offends the religious sensibilities of many people, but sometimes, as that same colleague once told me, the church finds that it must be faithful in new directions even if those directions are painful and terrifying (think for a minute, by the way, about the Protestant Reformation: that must have been pretty scary, too). Yes, maybe there are those who are sometimes scratching their heads at us, and questioning what we are doing and where we are going. But these are hopeful times, too, because we have glimpsed the promises of God unfolding before our eyes, and we're looking beyond the uncertainties and the fears and the criticisms; we're setting off on this journey with our eyes and our souls and our hearts and our minds fixed on Jesus and on the very example he set for us in his own life, when he welcomed all of God's children, and healed them, and fed them, and called them to follow him. The mysterious unfolding of the promises of God. Perhaps a baby resembles that unfolding of God's promises because we have no idea what will happen in the future, what and who a baby will grow up to be. The narrator of Marilynne Robinson's deeply moving book, *Gilead*, reflects on what it means to bless another. The elderly pastor says the reality of blessing is that it "doesn't enhance sacredness but acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time." Simeon, holding the baby Jesus that day in the temple, surely did not comprehend the mystery in his arms. But he allowed for the possibilities of God's power to unfold in ways he could not imagine but only hope for. On a personal note: All of my life, each time a baby is baptized, I can hear my 92-year-old mother telling me that her mother, for whom I am named, always kissed the head of a newly baptized infant, and so my mother in her turn has always done the same. I find myself remembering that each time I've baptized a baby, when parents (including my own children) bring their beloved child to introduce him or her to their covenant community. Like Simeon and Anna long ago, we acknowledge the reality beyond our eyes even as we behold the beauty and the mystery of a new child, a new person, a bearer of God's peace and hope for the world. If they sang God's praises so long ago, how can we do otherwise on

each bright and hope-filled morning? For Further Reflection Soren Kierkegaard, 19th century Purity of heart is to will one thing. Oscar Wilde, 19th century A dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th century People only see what they are prepared to see. Jonathan Swift, 18th century Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others. Helen Keller, 20th century The most pathetic person in the world is the one who has sight, but no vision. Billy Graham, 20th century The most eloquent prayer is the prayer through hands that heal and bless.