



St. Mary's Episcopal Church

January 2, 2022

Christmas 2 Year C

Matthew 2:1-12

Message by Rev. Michael Burke



Home By Another Way.

That's the direction the Gospel this morning tells us the Magi took: Home by another way.

Well, here we are, January 2022, the second and last Sunday in Christmas. It is also the ninth of the twelve days of Christmas, to be exact. I say this in the event that you are giving the traditional "twelve

Days of Christmas,” I don’t want you to make the faux pas of delivering “ten Lords a-leaping” on the wrong day. According to Frederic Austin’s 1909 version¹ of the song, that’s the gift for *tomorrow*, on the Tenth day of Christmas.²

Let us just take a moment to reflect on where we have come from, and the journey of the last five weeks.

As we began Advent, the scriptures brought us images of travel, times and circumstances that have taken the ancient people of God far from home – first in the Exodus story, when God has freed them from slavery in Egypt and Moses led them into the wilderness in search of the promised land. We have explored images and themes of wilderness and wandering. Then John the Baptizer appears on the banks of the river Jordan, echoing the proclamations of the prophet Isaiah, from a time when the people were in exile in Babylon, and prayed fervently that God would make a way home for them through the wilderness when no way was to be found. To John’s audience, hundreds of years later, the barriers between themselves and “home” were no longer physical, mountains, valleys and such, but spiritual, and John called the people back to “repent,” to “change directions,” and to return to a rich and sustaining relationship with God.

In the readings of the Christmas scriptures, we heard of “glad tidings of great joy”³ that God’s own Self has come among us, in the person of the Christ Child, “Emmanuel,” meaning “God With Us,” “God For Us.” In the liturgy of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we hear the words “Welcome Home,” for God has prepared within us a place for Godself, the first place in our lives and a home in our hearts.

Philips Brooks, the Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston, 150 or so years ago, penned the poem that his organist Lewis Redner transformed into the Christmas Hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem. Its final stanza reads:

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today⁴*

Having searched the world over for “home,” a place where we can repair from the world and be fully whomever God has created us to be, we find that it is in Christ, and Christ in us, that we fully find our home.

But no sooner than we sing of the innocence and “return” of Christmas, than we are jarred out of our rest with the Gospel for today. For somewhere outside the placid Christmas scene of angels and

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frederic_Austin

² See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve_Days_of_Christmas_%28song%29

³ Luke 2:10 from the [King James Bible](#): “And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”

⁴ See <https://genius.com/Christmas-songs-o-little-town-of-bethlehem-lyrics>

shepherds prowls the King Herod and his legions, hungry for power and alert for anyone who might be a rival to his kingship.

The Maji must “hit the road again,” this time avoiding Herod and his men. So, the sacred story tells us, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

So... where does that leave *us*?

We too live in this liminal time, between the peace and holiness of a “Silent Night,” and the reality of the everyday life reflected through the cable news talk shows.

Our nation is more politically divided than ever, when even seemingly innocuous things like public health precautions have become stand-ins for deep seated values of liberty and personal freedom. Our largely two-party system of governance has devolved into something akin to two rival sports teams, and the goal appears to be not to necessarily govern in the common good, but to beat the other team.

We're all tired. Tired of physical separation, COVID tests, travel difficulties... Maybe some of us are tired of being tired.

Most of us over the past two years have suffered personal losses as well. So many are in a prolonged stage of grieving.

I get that. I see you. We all get that.

And it's a good and human thing to allow ourselves to feel what we are feeling. To see what we are seeing. Even sadness, frustration, and loss. To name right out loud this liminal space we are in: What has been is behind us now; what we will be is not yet clear.

And if we have worries or anxieties as we stand at this threshold of a brand-new calendar year, that too is understandable. Do we know what the omicron variant will do? Will it sweep through our community with only mild or moderate illness? Or will the numbers of those affected be so large that even the small percentage of those seriously ill will overwhelm our health care capacities?

We don't know for certain. And being in a state of not-knowing can be difficult as well.

In the church newsletter the Thursday prior to Christmas, I announced St. Mary's plan to again be offering the option of gathering inside the church sanctuary for hybrid services, meaning both on-campus and also available over our usual online channels, beginning in just a few weeks.

Will circumstances and COVID rates allow us to act on these plans? As hard as it is to say this, the answer is “we just do not know yet.”

But as I look out at the dawning of this new year, I'm thinking of the Maji of old. The scripture says that having visited Mary and Jesus, they left by another road; they went home by another way.

I can't shake the feeling that the encounter with the Christ child changed them.

And what ‘other road,’ what “new way” is this? How did they find it?

In my head I keep hearing the words of Christ, when the disciple Thomas proclaimed, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?”

Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”⁵

In 1927 the poet T.S. Eliot wrote “Journey of the Magi,” in the middle of his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. The story is told from the point of view of one of the Magi. Instead of a recounting of the wonders of the journey, most of the poem tells of the tediousness and pain of the journey to the manger. But upon later reflection, the Magi finds that their encounter with Christ has changed them profoundly. Despite their sense of alienation from the world and a general sense of powerlessness about what is happening all about them, (and here I think about Herod), they recognize that the world has changed for them in this encounter. The old world has passed away, and although they return to their kingdoms, they feel out of place there, and await a new birth, that sometimes feels like dying.

The poem is too long to recite here, but I’ve included it in the written copy of the sermon, which we post as a download later in the day each Sunday on our website.

This poem “Journey of the Magi”⁶ ends on a note of expectation and hope.

The great Catholic spiritual writer Henri Nouwen once wrote: “

“Hope is not dependent on peace in the land, justice in the world, and success in business. Hope is willing to leave unanswered questions unanswered and unknown futures unknown. Hope makes you see God’s guiding hand not only in the gentle and pleasant moments but also in the shadows of disappointment and darkness.”⁷

Friends, the light is coming. But know this as well: right here, right now, in this liminal space, between darkness and light, God is with you. God is with us all.

In 2022, my prayer for you, my prayer for us all, is that in the midst of this present darkness, may the night sky fill with stars, the heavens be ablaze with wonder, and that God, who is ever present with us, might grant us all the strength and direction to continue to walk in the way of hope and faithfulness, and that we all might take another road home, together.

Amen.

⁵ John 14:5-6

⁶ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_of_the_Magi

⁷ Henri Nouwen, Turn My Mourning into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times Paperback – Thomas Nelson Publishers, ISBN-10 : 0849945097; ISBN-13 : 978-0849945090 November 23, 2010

Robert Frost:

THE ROAD NOT TAKEN

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I marked the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Journey of the Magi, by T. S. Eliot

Journey of the Magi

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.'
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.

With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins,
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

from *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (Faber, 1974), by permission of the publisher,
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Songfile:

"Home By Another Way" James Taylor

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 camel's 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 Gods, 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.
 It's 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.

Writer(s): James Taylor, Timothy Mayer

Scriptures for Today:

The Collect

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament - Jeremiah 31:7-14

Thus says the Lord:

Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob,
and raise shouts for the chief of the nations;

proclaim, give praise, and say,
"Save, O Lord, your people,
the remnant of Israel."

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north,
and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth,

among them the blind and the lame, those with child and
those in labor, together;
a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come,
and with consolations I will lead them back,

I will let them walk by brooks of water,
in a straight path in which they shall not stumble;

for I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations,
and declare it in the coastlands far away;

say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."

For the Lord has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him.

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,

over the grain, the wine, and the oil,
and over the young of the flock and the herd;

their life shall become like a watered garden,
and they shall never languish again.

Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.

I will turn their mourning into joy,
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.

I will give the priests their fill of fatness,
and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty,

says the Lord.

Psalm 84 or 84:1-8

1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! *
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.

3 Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.

4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you! *
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.

5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs, *
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.

6 They will climb from height to height, *
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.

7 Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; *
hearken, O God of Jacob.

8 Behold our defender, O God; *
and look upon the face of your Anointed.

[9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room, *
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.

10 For the Lord God is both sun and shield; *
he will give grace and glory;

11 No good thing will the Lord withhold *
from those who walk with integrity.

12 O Lord of hosts, *
happy are they who put their trust in you!]

The New Testament Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

The Holy Gospel: 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 chests, 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.

And More Scripture:

John 14: 5-14

⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷ If you really know me, you will know^b my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

⁸ Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

⁹ Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

¹² Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. ¹³ And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. ¹⁴ You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.