

January 7, 2018 Epiphany
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 2:1-12

Another Road

Though we've just begun a brand new year, I want to start this sermon by asking you to think back to something from years past: Do you remember maps? Do you remember the olden days, when people used paper maps to get from place to place? Those big old accordion tri-folds that required origami skills to refold? Or multi-page atlases, the states bound together in a book?

I remember, too, a next stage: mapquest. I remember when I first heard of mapquest in the late nineties, the internet existed, was connecting people from far-off places, but it wasn't something you could carry around in your pocket. So back then before going on a road trip we would sit at a computer, log in to mapquest, type in starting and ending points, and watch how it figured it all out for you. It was amazing! You just had to click print, because you couldn't take a desktop monitor and hard drive in a car. Instead we would bring those pages of directions with the arrows saying turn at this point and that.

Of course now even that seems hopelessly dated. Nowadays, for many people, if you want to get from one place to another you simply go to an app on your phone. You can even just passively listen as a disembodied voice tells you what to do. It's so convenient, and compact, and alert to current conditions—and it's sometimes amusing, too. At least, my husband and I always find it amusing when we're following the phone's directions and it tells us of another route we could take—have you had this experience? You're traveling along, following the phone's directions, and then the phone notes another road you can take (it's always exciting to see what the phone will suggest: what does she know that you don't? is there road construction? or a crash?) but often, with the suggestion of an another route the phone will have a comment like this: "This road is 34 minutes slower." "Uh, thanks for the information Siri, but why would we want to go that way?" Sometimes smartphones are pretty dumb.

I was thinking of this: of maps, and directions, and routes, when I read today's gospel, the story of the wise men, who themselves were on a road trip, who set out "to see the child who has been born King of the Jews." As navigators even more ancient than us, as was the practice of many ancient navigators, their map was the stars; their app was one star in particular. They followed this star until they come upon a king, a grown up king named Herod. Not the king they're looking for, but they ask him for directions, "What news does he have about a new king in town?" This doesn't seem an altogether wise move: asking current leadership about what will replace him. But Herod wants to help them out, or so he says. Herod quickly googles: "Messiah will be born where?" And then the wise men go Bethlehem. The star leads the way: stops over the place where the child was and says, "You have arrived."

When the wise men see the child the Bible says they are "overwhelmed with joy." Their hearts are so full, they want to share the goodness they feel, give back to it somehow. Their hearts are so full they can barely stand. They can only kneel, and give what they have. They've travelled into, not just a new year, but a new epoch, now that they've seen this newborn king.

And then, all too soon, it is time to leave, time to head back to the life they left. And once again in this story directions become important, as the last line says, "they left for their own country by another road." It was especially when I read this last line that I thought of modern day driving directions, and how often I use them, and how often they suggest another road—but how often it's a slower road. Why would you go that way?

We don't know if the other road that the wise men took home took longer; the Biblical text is silent about that. We do know that it was a really good idea that they took it. It was wise

not to see Herod again, because Herod was crazy. Even in the space of this brief story you can hear how threatened Herod is by the announcement of another kind of reign, how to avoid it Herod engages in secret talks, how insincere he is about wanting to pay attention, homage, to anyone other than himself. And if you read more about Herod in other parts of the Bible and in other ancient texts it just gets worse. This ruler that they had in those times, this guy who thought he was king back then, was a fearful, rash, double-dealing, base-instinct pleasing, power-hungry excuse for a leader who had no regard for the lives of others. It's a good idea to go a way that avoids that, even if it takes some extra time.

The wise men go another way. Not because of what Siri said, but because of a dream, the Bible says. The wise men have a dream after seeing the child. I think they could have that dream, because they saw the child. Seeing the child changed them, showed them something different, opened their minds to another path. After seeing the child, the wise men went back to the life they had come from, but not in the same way they came. They returned to their regular lives but in a different way, by a different route, because of the dream, because of the child.

I think we can have that dream, too, we who have seen the child. We too have a dream of taking another road, and we can follow that dream, because that child grew up. The child grew up, and gave people directions, and listeners wrote it down on paper, and bound it in a book, all these directions about taking this other road.

Here are some of the markers of this road, here are some of the turns you take when you are on it: You are forgiving. You forgive easily, and often. You know how often you yourself have been forgiven, you are so grateful for it, you want to extend that to others, too. Following closely upon this, you are generous. You recognize all that you've been given and you want to share it; you readily give what you have and who you are, and the more you give, the more you see you have. Along this route, you think about others more. You spend less time thinking about what might make your own life better, and more time thinking about what you can do for other people, to make their lives better. As you do, you realize how much better you feel about yourself, how much better your life is for it. Taking this path, you are patient. You are kind. You are not easily angered. You practice self-control.

All these things take time. It takes a lot of extra time, this other road we take as Christians. But we take this road because we believe that life is more than getting from one point to another. We take this road, because we believe that in matters of human geography, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line. And we take this road, because Christ did. Christ led the way, showing us, making it possible for us, to go places we didn't know existed, to be people we could not have been last year.

I am not going to start taking the long cuts that Siri so blithely suggests. I will still see them and enjoy saying, "Ha! I'm smarter than my phone!" But next time Siri offers me another road, I will think of Epiphany, I will think of this story that caps the Christmas season, this gospel that sends us back to our regular lives with this: seeing the baby changes you, take that other road, and be wise.