

“Home By Another Way”
Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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What excites you about the New Year? What are you curious about? Are any of you nervous about 2019?

Those are the questions Dr. John Williams asked of his readers in his latest pastoral letter to the faculty, staff, students, and alumnus of Austin College in Sherman, Texas. As the college chaplain there, that’s his job: to encourage people—students particularly—to stoke the fires of their curiosity and to explore the path that that burning light reveals. He would say that curiosity is a “God thing” and that path is our “vocation.”

That’s also a teacher’s job. A teacher helps us to be curious. A teacher helps us to learn. A teacher dares us to walk down the road of discovery.

As an aside, I want to tell you how thrilled I am to be taking an iFlip beginner’s French class at the university. My teacher is incredible and is encouraging us to speak French, to try on French sounds, to bravely attempt conversations. So far, we are really, really bad at it. We count together and introduce ourselves and cannibalize the alphabet. We sound bad. *Ça va mal pour moi.*

It seems to me that teachers give away all they have. Everything they know, they share. Everything they have, they give. THANK YOU, TEACHERS.

Why do teachers do this? I suspect it is because they want to equip their students to learn, to explore, to grow. To steal from our text from Matthew’s gospel, I think our teachers want to equip and encourage us to follow the star that God places before us. Teachers want us to explore that road. To book tickets for that adventure.

The wise men were curious about the star they saw in the East. They were curious enough to get up, leave worldly comforts behind, and set out on a journey that would take them into a strange, new land. Remember, Chaplain John William would call that curiosity “God’s call” and that road our “God-given vocation.” (vocare/latin/”call”).

Their bravery to follow that star nudges us to ask ourselves this question: Are we willing to go where the star leads? Are we curious enough to step out of our routines, to dare a new path in this new year, to look behind a curtain we’ve never before opened? If asked to go to Bethlehem, will we pack our camel and go? Dare we change our major, take that new job, work on that stale relationship, tackle an old problem with new hope, make a new friend?

The wise men, thank God, were willing. They saw the star and dared to follow it.

Are we?

I pray I’m that brave in this new year.

* * *

But there’s something else to notice about the wise men’s bravery.

Not only were the wise men brave enough to strike out on a new journey, they were flexible enough to change course in the middle of their journey. Herod told them: *after you visit Jesus, come back to me, and tell me where he is so that I can worship him, too.* The wise men were warned in a dream to go home another way. It takes a ton of energy to change your plans. The wise men did.

Going back the exact same way they came would have been easier and safer and probably more economical. They knew where the hotels were. They knew when to expect rest areas and Cracker Barrells. But they opted to step out of their rut again, and draw another course home on that map through that dangerous desert.

* * *

These wise men intrigue me. Every year they traipse across my imagination. They walk right through the middle of our Christmas celebration. Like Mary and Joseph, they step out in faith and, as it turns out, follow God's call into new territory. They are faithful every year. Every year they ask me to be faithful, too.

But I'm not sure I'm curious enough to actually get up and follow that star, no matter how bright it is. My apathy, jadedness, doubt, and social paralysis make for a lot of heavy baggage. Every year I have to ask, what baggage holds me back? Am I willing to dump some stuff out and leave some stuff behind?

I hope so.

Because the road that God calls us on is filled with new things to discover, new ways to serve our neighbor, and all sorts of opportunity for growth and deep satisfaction.

And there's one thing we know that those wise men did not: by the power of God's Spirit, we are never alone. Thank God, Jesus walks with us. Alleluia. AMEN.

Let us PRAY:

Holy God, sustain us, we pray, on the journey to which you've called us. Inspire us to love you by deepening relations with and loving the neighbors we meet along the way.

We pray for our neighbors now:

- the strangers and angels-unawares,
- the hustled and hassled dodging the cold in alleys and stables,
- locals, out of towners, and passers-through,
- those who hover in halls of power,
- those who feel powerless and those who really are.

We lift these up to you, as well as all the other saints you've given us with whom we share the journey.

Jesus was born to Palistinian Jews with a storied lineage:

harlots, heroes, kings, foreigners, and the well-heeled.

He was visited by adoring outsiders from lands far away.

Foreign kings, shepherds, and angels gathered at his manger.

His birth, his life, his teaching, his death and resurrection, and his story

have drawn the whole world to his side.

He welcomes all-comers.

A divided world finds a home in his love.

Forgive us for building walls that serve to separate
the slave from the free,
the gentile from the Jew,
the me from the you,
the male from the female,
and the whole human family, fractured as we are,
that Jesus came to unite.

Heal us from our warring madness. And grant us your peace, sustained as we are at tables like this. For the bread, for the fruit of the vine, for your love we say with full hearts:

thank you,
thank you,
thank you.

We ask this and all prayers in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray saying together: Our Father . . . AMEN.

Gospel Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ '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.'"

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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." ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.