

## *Home by Another Road*

A Sermon Preached by the  
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Epiphany Sunday January 6, 2008  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Matthew 2:1-12

You know, of course, that had there been three wise women, they would have asked for directions and arrived on time, they would have brought practical gifts, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a hot dish, and there would be peace on earth!

Every year it seems more difficult to leave the manger. Even after the four long weeks of Advent and the whirlwind of Christmas, the twelve days of Christmas leading to Epiphany somehow never seem long enough. There's always a part of me that wants time to stop long enough for me to catch my breath. Because just about the time I'm ready to enjoy Christmas, it's time to dismantle the tree – and this year, to actually decorate it first – time to take down the stockings and throw out what's left of the Christmas cookies. I'm still lingering in the afterglow of “Silent Night,” and here's Epiphany, and the wise men are already headed home by another road.

This year, leaving the manger wasn't made any easier by having the text about the slaughter of the innocents thrown in there the Sunday after Christmas, before the magi even get to the manger. In the Gospel account, as you might remember, that happens after the magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod.

But in the grand scheme of things, in the “Gospel Combo” approach to the scriptures that we tend to have – you know, a little Luke here, a little Matthew there, a little of our own creativity, until we have the seamless story of Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem and finding no room at the inn, of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, angels appearing the night sky, a baby born in a manger, and finally wise men from the east following a star; in the grand scheme of things, we move things around to tell the story the way we want anyway.

The wise men, or magi, or kings as they were later called, only appear in Matthew, and only in the passage we just read. That's all we know about

the visitors from the east, and it's really not very much when you think about how much we invest in that visit.

We assume that there were three of them, probably because that's the number of gifts that were presented – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the scripture only says, “wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.” For all we know, there might have been nine of them, just like the nine wise men who inhabit our family nativity set. In the Eastern tradition, there are twelve of them. It's unlikely that there were any women in that exotic traveling party from the east, but then, we assume a lot.

The word that the writer of Matthew uses to describe them is later translated in Acts as “magician,” magi. Some recent scholarship seems to favor “astrologer,” and since their visit was prompted by their observation of the stars, that also seems to make some sense.

Eventually, the three were called kings, perhaps because of the influence of the Isaiah passage that “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” And according to a tradition that dates back to medieval times, they were named Melchior, king of Persia; Gaspar, king of India; and Balthasar, king of Arabia. In the same way, the gifts were given spiritual meaning. Gold symbolized gifts fit for a king, frankincense as holy perfume used in the sanctuary of the temple and nowhere else, myrrh as anointing oil, later tied to the myrrh in John's Gospel, which was brought to anoint Jesus' body for burial. For the writer of Matthew, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh may be nothing more than gifts fit for a king. However much it helps us to enter into the spirit of the story, we need to remember that all of this goes way beyond what the writer of Matthew tells us.

We tell stories the way we need to remember them, the way we want to remember them. This story of the wise men, the magi, has been told again and again in so many different ways. One of my most favorite recent re-tellings was “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” in which the Herdmann boys arrive as the magi. Do you remember what they brought to the manger? Not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but a baked ham from their food basket with a big red bow that said, “Merry Christmas.” And somehow it just seemed right.

Sometimes in the telling, we hear something new, and this year when I picked up the story, the last line caught my attention: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” At some point, ready or not, we have to leave the manger; and maybe that's the whole point. It's time to go, it's time to leave our gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh and baked ham, and start for home.

So every year, like the magi, we leave the manger and start for home. But when we leave the manger, we're not the same – or at least we shouldn't be. Something happens at the manger to change us. Why did we come in the first place if we didn't expect to be transformed, to be changed? That's what happens at the manger year after year after year.

Maybe this year, like the magi, we will choose to go home by another road. I've given some thought to what that might look like for me, but it means different things personally for each of us. Perhaps going home by another road means reconciliation with a child, now an adult, whose presence at the Christmas dinner table always ends dinner with a disagreement. One woman, in an article I was reading, said that it wasn't Christmas in her family until somebody had been reduced to tears.

Or maybe it means settling a dispute with a co-worker, someone whose ego always seems to be in the way of more pleasant working conditions. Maybe it's our ego that's in the way.

It might mean letting go of old grudges and memories of hurt feelings to allow some space for renewed friendship. Or it may mean letting our guard down long enough to experience someone reaching out to us with a healing hand. We all know where the spots are that are painful to the touch, and our tendency is to keep people at a distance rather than risk getting hurt again. But it can also keep us from experiencing healing.

Perhaps it means that we make some different decisions about the way we choose to live. Seeking help for addictions that are unhealthy, confronting abusive behavior, leaving a workplace that brings stressful conditions to our family life, finding the courage to stand up for ourselves or someone else. We all know where the changes need to be made in order for us to be healed and whole.

The sermon title this morning, "Home by Another Road," (besides being the way of the magi) was taken from a book by UCC minister Jim Burklo entitled, "Open Christianity: Home by Another Road," in which he talks about clearing a road through Christian traditions and scriptures, and coming to a place where his faith can stand true and genuine. It becomes a matter of finding that place, defining or describing the destination, or knowing what home looks like, and then learning to value the journey as much as the destination.

Interim time in a congregation is when we go home by another road. It's clearing a path through all of the history and traditions, through assumptions and expectations for the future, and through our own reluctance to embrace change. It begins with being able to describe home, to talk about

what we want this home – this faith community – to look like, what we believe God is calling us to be and do in this next stage of our life together.

I can't tell you what it will look like. That will be something we discover together on this journey. But I can tell you that it will not look anything at all like it did the last time you called a pastor. Whether it's obvious yet or not, you are a much different congregation than the one that called Mark Bayert, even the one that called Dries. And you are a much different congregation for having had both of those people in pastoral leadership.

To begin with, the community around us is changing far more rapidly than we probably expected. There is a significant immigrant population who bring a wonderfully rich diversity to our community. Schools are finding new and creative ways of accommodating changes in their student body. Neighborhoods are turning over as people age and move into smaller homes. We have one of the largest Presbyterian Homes facilities right next door.

When we begin our self-study, we will want to look at how the changes in the Bloomington community affect not only our membership, but the decisions we make about programming and staffing and mission. We'll be going home by another road.

Secondly, like so many other churches, Oak Grove has reached the stage of life when the pool of available volunteers is diminishing more and more rapidly. And like so many other churches, we still want to be able to do the same kind of programming, education, outreach, mission and pastoral care that we've always done, which inevitably means more paid staff to pick up the slack. And that, in turn, affects the bottom line. So we'll be asking some hard questions, like how long can we continue to staff at this level and be a presence in the community, given the budgetary constraints that we're going to face sooner rather than later.

Because difficult as it is to hear, the people who have been faithful and untiring volunteers for years and years are the very same people who have been the financial foundation of the church. We need to come to terms with the fact that many younger families in churches today simply don't have the financial resources or the time to support the church the way we've counted on for generations. We're going to have to be very creative about finding ways to invite them to discipleship and show them how much we value the gifts that they bring to the manger.

And we're going to have to be creative about finding ways to support the budget. At its last meeting, the session voted to convene a task force to look at the financial future of the church so that what we do today will build a healthy and vibrant future that includes not only a commitment to our

members to provide the kind of programs and care that they would like, but also a commitment to the community that we live in through continued outreach, and to the wider mission of the church. That means that we'll probably be going home by another road.

In the chapter entitled, "Coming Home to Spiritually Centered Community," Jim Burklo writes this, "The institutional Christian church aims at something better than itself. Its purpose is to help transform human society into a multiracial, multicultural community of peace, justice, harmony, beauty, and reverence." He goes on to say, "All too often, churches lose sight of this goal and become preoccupied with their own propagation and self-preservation. The Church sometimes clings to its rituals and jargon as ways of maintaining a superior and separate identity," when, in fact, the vision for God's reign is a world where "people of all cultures and religions are gathered together to share their common delight in the presence of God. It is a vision of the fulfillment of the Church's mission in the world."<sup>1</sup>

Burklo reminds us that congregations, local churches, are "ideally situated to respond to a wide range of basic human needs, ranging from spiritual growth groups, to programs that feed the hungry, to efforts to reform the social and political order. The local congregation is a basic unit of American society, giving people in this vast and lonesome land a sense of belonging."<sup>2</sup> That would be us, folks, and from what I've learned in the short time I've been here, we're pretty good at it.

As we learn more about ourselves as a congregation, our hopes and dreams for what's next, our mission focus, our community involvement; as we prepare for the work of a Pastor Nominating Committee, as we get ready to welcome a new pastor who will move this church into the next stage of life, we will need to go home by another road. Whatever road we take, we would do well to always travel with these words from a lovely poem by Harold Warheim:

"Because the world is poor and starving,  
    Go with bread.  
Because the world is filled with fear,  
    Go with courage.  
Because the world is in despair,

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Burklo, *Open Christianity: Home by Another Road*, California: Rising Starr Press, 2002, p. 137,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Go with hope.  
Because the world is living lies,  
Go with truth.  
Because the world is sick with sorrow,  
Go with joy.  
Because the world is weary of wars,  
Go with peace.  
Because the world is seldom fair,  
Go with justice.  
Because the world is under judgment,  
Go with mercy.  
Because the world will die without it,  
Go with love.”

Happy New Year! Amen.