

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

TOPIC: Magi from the east go to Jerusalem looking for the Jewish king; Herod directs them and deceives them.

SUBJECT: God invites people to go a different route, so they may be as God intends they be.

TITLE: By a Different Route

When I first started serving the church – around the time of Jesus’ birth, I think – I experienced what I referred to as “aha moments.” They were moments when something I’d hear, sing, or speak burst into my world with surprise and awe.

I’ve come to feel “aha moments” are moments God speaks to me.

I still have “aha moments”. Through the years, I’ve realized “aha moments” are occasions God is inviting me to consider a different route. “Aha” moments are what my sister calls “course corrections.” They are those moments God comes to me so I will go by a different route, not unlike the Magi.

Even the term Magi is a term I’ve rarely used, but after researching this week’s gospel, I understand why Magi is a better term than “wise men” or “three kings”. Magi seems to be the most appropriate and accurate term and just because there were three gifts, does not mean the gifts were limited to three men; the three gifts mentioned may have come from several magi – both men and women.

So, my prayer is that you might hear God bringing you those “aha” moments, so where you need to, you may return to life by a different route. It seems to me God’s invitation to go a different route is the equivalent to a declaration of independence from whatever makes you feel trapped, so long as you truly invest yourself into what God has in store for your life.

PRAYER

Contrary to what is often seen in children’s Christmas pageants, movies and read in storytelling books, the Magi probably never showed up at the stable. In fact, in Matthew’s

gospel, there is no stable, so Mary and Joseph were possibly staying with relatives in a later return to Bethlehem.

What Matthew does give us, however, are relevant terms for Jesus. Matthew does not refer to Jesus as an infant, but instead uses Greek words that describe a young child. As the story is told, the Magi show up in Jerusalem following a star that has been appearing to them over a period of time. First, the Magi go to Jerusalem to Rome's puppet "King" Herod, who history records as a despicable man. Herod was unmoored and clearly anxious, but privilege and entitlement often make people jump at the slightest hint of anxiety.

It's important, though, to watch Herod. Unlike the Magi, Herod is stuck, just like the Sanhedrin and the other religious leaders he called together to find out where the Messiah was foretold to be born. Fear kept Herod stuck. Privilege and power kept Herod stuck. Being a con man kept Herod stuck. Being a cheat kept Herod stuck. Being a liar and a murderer kept Herod stuck. For all practical purposes, Herod represents someone who continues along the route ego, pride, selfishness, and arrogance that keeps people in darkness, chaos and death.

When I was in seminary, I took a class called Music and Arts in worship, and it fascinates me how earlier versions of songs often had more stanzas. *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* is one such song, and the verse that was removed summarizes the contrast.

*Yet with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two-thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.*

The Magi hear the angels sing; so do those who listen to the instruction to go a way different from traits ascribed to Herod; maybe it's Matthew's first call to repentance. The Magi represent all of the good qualities you might want to have as a follower of Christ – not just because they bring gifts of gold (for the child's kin-ship with humanity), frankincense (for the child as a high priest) and myrrh (for the child's humanness and death), but the Magi represent qualities like faith, reason, hope, good works, prayer, humility, love, mercy, purity and a believing heart. That the Magi bring gifts also represents a shift from gift-receiving to gift-giving. Going a different way means making everything right down to finances more susceptible to God's direction.

Understanding the difference between Herod's way and the Magi's way essentially points us to a choice to follow the same old, unchanging, well-traveled route that's a foot deep down an unimproved country road or to go a different route. Your choice.

As Christian theology suggests: *living without God is a real death and dying to God is the only way to live.* (Read the words in *italics* again!)

The Magi return by a different route because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Consequently, Jesus' parents flee Bethlehem and go to Egypt becoming refugees and illegal immigrants, and the same anxiety Herod had – that made all of Jerusalem uptight – is unleashed on Bethlehem, when Herod has all the children two and younger killed. What matters most about the slaughter of the innocents suggests that staying on the same, worn, broken path results in death. That's what happens when a person lets themselves be corrupted to the point they don't know themselves, and unwilling and unable to change, like Herod.

There is a clear contrast between Herod and the Magi. The Magi represent people who are willing to read and pay attention to the rhythms of the universe, and they can be amazed to see God bring human life and creation into harmony. The Magi were willing to listen and learn. The Magi found joy in growing along the journey called life taken by a different route. You will too!

Going through life by a different route is a response to God's first calling on our lives – to simply be who God made us to be. When life is going nowhere, “aha moments” are reminders God is waiting to take you to the place God intends. If you feel fearful, anxious, power-hungry, controlling like Herod, it might be time to be still and listen because God always works through situations we face in life. Being who God intends is discovered in qualities like faith, reason, hope, good works, prayer, humility, love, hope, mercy, purity and people with believing hearts – the qualities of the Magi.

Living by a different route means realizing everything isn't the way it's supposed to be, but God knows the way and directs you to it. Living by a different route means making decisions that take time to reveal. Living by a different route means God will lead you in some unexpected and unusual ways. When you choose the Magi way – returning to life by a different road – life will never be the same again.

So: How is God inviting you to take a different route? If that's happening, dedicate yourself to it, motivate yourself by it, and see what God has in store for that different route God's directing you to take.

In the name of the triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – one God in perfect community. Amen.