

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2002

They Left By Another Road

Matthew 2:1-12

Those of you who were here last Sunday,
have no probably noticed
that we are telling the Christmas story out of sequence.
Last Sunday we read the conclusion of the Christmas narrative,
the holy family's flight to Egypt
and Herod's slaughter of the innocents,
This week we read the middle of the Christmas narrative,
the story of the wise men.

The reason we do this
is that this year, January 6th, the Day of Epiphany, falls on a Sunday.
And for over 1600 years
Epiphany has been the day when the church remembers
the visit of these wise men from the East
who pay homage to the child Jesus.

Epiphany is one of the oldest festivals of the Christian Church.
In the early centuries, the feast day of January 6th
was one of the three most important festivals of the Christian Church
along with Easter and Pentecost.
Originally, January 6th
marked the day on which the Church celebrated the Baptism of Jesus.
For other Christians,
it marked the day for celebration of Christ's birth
(in fact, for the Orthodox Church, it still is Christmas Day).
But in the West,
when Christians decided that the Roman midwinter festival
would become the day to celebrate birth of Christ,
January 6th became, as it is for us still,
the Day of Epiphany.

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There is a great deal that can be said about the visit of these wise men,
but today I am drawn to the end of their story,
an end which is actually a beginning for these foreign travelers...

*...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.*

The lives of these three wise men were changed after seeing Jesus.
Or perhaps it was more than just seeing him.
Perhaps it was the ordeal of diligently searching for Jesus
or the act of giving gifts to this new king
rather than just seeing him
that changed their lives.

Whatever the case, after seeing the child,
after exulting in the fulfillment of their long quest
after giving the gifts they had so carefully carried all that way
these three wise men ended up going home by another road,
they changed their plans in a big and risky way.

Maybe the thing that makes these three men “wise men”
is that they were open to seeing whatever God had to show them;
and they allowed themselves to be shaped – to be changed
by what God had to show them.

We are now 6 days into the New Year, by the Roman Calendar.
We have made our New Year’s resolutions
(as we are reminded by all the commercials on TV
that want to sell us products to help us keep
our New Years resolutions.)

Regardless of how earnestly we will actually pursue these resolutions
many of us have a plan, a vision,
for how we’d like our lives to turn out in the coming year.

No doubt the wise men had their own lists of resolutions.
They had their own hopes and dreams for what their lives should be.
But, apparently they had something else as well:
they had this willingness to let God show them
what their lives should be,
even if it turned out to be quite different
from what they had in mind.

Perhaps that’s not a bad resolution for you and me this year:
to be open to whatever God will show us
to allow God to shape us...to change us.

Because if the Christmas story is true for us,
if God is doing something utterly brand new in our lives,
it will probably be something that surprises us...
and surprises can be unsettling.

But if we learn anything from the whole story of Jesus, it is that
 God's surprises are the surprises of a loving parent for a child.
If we will let ourselves be guided by God's surprises,
 guided in a different direction
 than we would have chosen on our own,
 then perhaps we too will find ourselves overwhelmed with joy
 at what we discover.

Of course, such discoveries do not come without challenge.
It is difficult enough, finding our way to Bethlehem.
It may be even more difficult, finding our way home by another road.
But something compelled these wise men to change their plans,
 something empowered them to risk traveling
 a new and unknown road?

I believe that these wise men were compelled by a hope
 bigger than their own lives.
Hope on a breathtaking scale, hope with a universal significance.
Hope not understood by the Herods of the world
 hope never controlled or manipulated or silenced by human power. Hope big
enough to change the course of history forever.

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After today, this year's season of Christmas will be over
 and we will return again to ordinary life.
On the Presbyterian Church calendar,
 we actually call these days Ordinary Time.
But it is in our ordinary times that the light of the Epiphany,
 can break into our world and surprise us.

Today, (in the 11:00 service) in a few moments,
 several members of this church
 who have been elected by you to serve in a special way, as officers,
 will be coming forward to be ordained and installed.
They may not be feeling very wise at the moment
 and they do not come bringing gold, frankincense, or myrrh,
 but they do bring the gift of their lives, their talents, their time.
They are probably becoming aware as they take this significant step
 that they will be traveling some unexpected roads
 in the years to come;
 roads that come as a surprise, as God's surprise for them,
 but roads showered in the light of a breathtaking hope.

Also coming forward will be those who, for the past years,
 some as many as 6 years,

have been giving their gifts and traveling some surprising roads.
They have without a doubt been changed by their journey.
The mere fact that they are still here, serving,
means they have been open to God's surprises,
they have allowed God to shape them.

As these new officers,
and these officers who are coming to the close of their term,
and all of us enter the New Year,
we come as those who have encountered
the breathtaking hope of Christmas.

We come and gather at this table, the table of Epiphany,
God's manifestation.

If we are open to the One who meets us here
in the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup
we may be surprised by the outcome.

For it is the One who meets us at this table
who gives us the strength to choose our roads as wise men and women,
even, maybe especially,
when it means a change of direction.