

Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2018

“Going Home Different”

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One joke tells that after the visit of the wise men, came the visit of three even wiser women. The wise women asked directions. They arrived on time. They helped clean the home. They brought appropriate gifts of clean diapers, casseroles for a week, and lots of formula. I mean gold, Frankincense, and myrrh for a child? Really?

The journey of the wise men in our story today marks the beginning of the season of Epiphany. And this morning I want us to reflect briefly on this idea of spiritual journeys. You may be aware of the spiritual pilgrimage across Spain to the famed cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Many people of faith have taken trips to the Holy Land. Christians have journeyed to other sacred places like the Iona community in Scotland, or the Taize Community in the south of France. But not all spiritual journeys requires us going to another country.

Just last month the confirmation class and some of our parents and leaders went to a church in downtown Milwaukee and walked the Labyrinth which is another type of spiritual journey. Here participants turn over to God a particular question or concern from their life. Then they allow the path of the labyrinth with its turns and curves and calming center space become a sacred journey into the heart of God. In addition, many among us have attended spiritual retreats or journeyed to mission work in Milwaukee and beyond and the common theme is that we receive inspiration, courage, and strength from the time we spend trusting God to lead us.

Another sort of Pilgrimage lies ahead for us in the United Church of Christ. It has been announced and plans are underway for Milwaukee to serve as host for the national meeting of our church, The General Synod, which will happen in June of 2019. UCC members and partners from all over the world will gather in our community and we “locals” will have an opportunity to pour out our warm Midwestern UCC hospitality, and we will get to experience our national gathering without traveling far. General Synod is far more than a business meeting; it will include opportunities for fellowship, dining, education and worship as well.

Here at Emanuel over the last few months we have been on another sort of journey of self discovery. The Appreciative Inquiry process is helping Emanuel Church get razor sharp about the ministry and mission God is calling us to, and who God is calling us to become.

So I guess my hope is you come to understand, if you don't already, that faith is a journey not a destination. Faith is not something a person has or doesn't have, we go through stages of faith and we are to be growing and maturing. With faith there is no moment when we have it all figured out. Every one of us is always student and teacher.

Today we hear of a life-changing, world-transforming journey. The pilgrimage of these wise men as they followed the star to meet Jesus. King Herod, discovering his power could be threatened by the birth of a newborn king who was NOT born within the confines of his royal family, sends the wise men to “go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word that I may go and pay him respect.” Though the story is clear “respect” is not what he has in mind.

So the Wise Men set off, they find the child, and they kneel and honor him. They present their gifts and then having received special instructions in a dream we hear the wise men “returned to their own country by another road.” They do this, the narrator tells us, because they learn it is horror, not homage the King has in store for the child.

But my favorite part of this story indicates the wise men went home by a different road. On one level we understand this to mean they came to Jesus by one path and were going home by an alternate route, likely one that prevented them from running into King Herod.

But on a deeper level, the wise men have just come face to face with Christ. They have seen the light in his eyes, they have heard Mary sing again of this child who is born to exalt the humble and fill the hungry with good things. Born to bring to light the ways of secrecy and corruption. Born to be strength for the powerless and to level the playing field with the powerful. Perhaps the wise men went home different because now that they had seen God’s appearing and basked in God’s light, something spiritual had changed in them. They were going home... Transformed! The Wise men had encountered God in the flesh and when that happens I don’t think we are supposed to go home the same.

For me that is the meaning of Christmas. It is another opportunity to experience God’s birth. We can all get hopeless at times, Christmas reminds us Hope is always being born. We may find ourselves settling for the status quo, Christmas promises that new life is being born. Christ’s birth and the visit of the wise men assures us that pure Grace and forgiveness are blooming for us and for the entire world. At Christmas time we are invited to open our eyes and hearts to the birth of goodness and beauty, the birth of hope and second chances, the birth of righteousness and peace. At Christmas we have another opportunity to go home, made newly alive and transformed by God.

I invite us to keep alert in 2018. Watch for those places where God’s love touches life. Be open to the new and the old of what God is doing in and through all creation. By our openness to God, we will each find opportunity time and time again to go home different, inspired, transformed... for when we meet our Savior, we should not go home the same.

Amen