

**Another Way Home  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 9, 2022  
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At an early age, my father insisted we understand maps, roads and directions. Well before I could drive my dad would quiz me on where we were at, what the next turn towards home would be and ask me directions to destinations he knew well. It was a game for my father and us kids and I loved it. I quickly learned how to understand my surroundings and find my way, long before GPS was a thing. I guess that is why today, my family calls me the human GPS. Luckily for me Grand Rapids is set up on a Four Quadrant grid system which is easy to memorize.

Some people memorize street names, others learn landmarks while others rely on the sun or stars, even a map to make sense of where they are going. Throughout life we all learn to rely on different things to give us direction and guide us to our destination. The same goes for our spiritual lives. People learn to use different tools to help find their way in the world. For some its prayer, others rely more on scripture while others see the community of faith and faith leaders as trustworthy guides. I guess that is why the UCC likes the phrase, "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here." We understand faith to be such a journey and communities of faith offer a place for companionship, support and guidance for this ever-changing journey called life.

Our Magi, in today's reading from Matthew, relied on the stars to understand their world. One could say they were seeking something to believe in. Scholars believe that the Writer included this story to show that God's plan for salvation was meant for all people not just the Jewish people. For me, these Magi represent people who are hungering for an encounter with God. They see evidence of God around them and

venture on a journey hoping to find meaning and purpose, something to truly believe in.

Along the way they seek what seems like a logical place for further guidance or help in finding their way. The Magi go to the seat of power and the established religious authorities. Why would they not seek a new king in the capital city, in a palace. We do this, we often turn to institutions, faith communities, or places of authority seeking others who understand our quest. We see the “all are welcome” sign and turn in hoping to find seasoned travelers like us.

But sometimes we may be surprised by what we discover. We expect a spiritually rich and caring place but find people like Herod in the story full of fear and suspicion, protecting their power. People do that sometimes. When something is new and different, like these foreigners from a far away land, people react suspiciously, cautiously and even send off a vibe of rejection. You know the feeling right? One knows when they are well received, or when one falls under a shadow of suspicion. I would suspect that the Magi were surprised when Herod didn't have a clue about the baby being born. He tried to fake his way into their trust, but the game was up. Herod was not a believer; he was only concerned about something threatening his power and authority.

Sometimes our institutions fail to live up to the ideals upon which they are built. True faith is replaced with religiosity and self-serving rules of piety that are empty of true faith. Throughout history institutions have failed to live up to the ideals upon which they were established. Power, corruption and control take the place of genuine faith as a means to control others. Consider how the Protestant Reformation began. People started seeing the corruption, abuse and greed from the Vatican. In Many ways the church had become a tool of the Roman Empire to justify the conquering of peoples and nations. People started to seek a more authentic faith. The invention of the printing press and increased literacy of the people allowed others to learn the faith for

themselves. Led by Luther, Zwigli, Calvin and others the Protestant Reformation was launched. Now I know that is an extremely abbreviated version, but I hope you get my point. People saw how the Gospel had been corrupted and sought to reclaim the faith for themselves. Likewise, the Magi, realizing or knowing that Herod was not what they were seeking, moved on in their quest.

In The Gospel text there are two emotions named, the first was fear and the second joy. When Herod heard a king had been born, he and the people became afraid. But when the Magi finally found the baby they were overcome with joy. These are two very telling emotions. I think the writer uses these emotional references to accentuate the difference between the false piety of Herod and the true faith found in Immanuel, God among us. When it comes to seeking true faith which do you want to experience, fear or joy? When people are seeking a faith community they seek acceptance, love and a sense kindred spirit. When you discover it you often feel joy.

For a long time in my faith journey, I was influenced by fear. Fear of damnation, fear of not being holy enough, fear of God's punishment. Over time I began to question why I was so afraid of everything when the bible says that "perfect love casts out all fear". 1 John 4:18. Time and again in the Gospel story, when God's revelation comes the messenger says, "Fear Not!" or Jesus says peace. The more I pursued this truth and began to really seek love and peace instead of being motivated by fear, the more I questioned the authenticity of the faith community I was raised in. Eventually I, like the Magi, continued on in search of true faith. Many people go through such experiences of rediscovery of their faith. Some may go to a new denomination; I have been in three. Others may leave organized religion because of experiencing too much personal trauma or rejection; they call themselves the spiritual, but not religious. While others may seek a new expression of faith through other religions. For me personally, having worked in Interfaith ministry for decades, I know that we can find kindred spirit people following the same star as we are, even in other religions.

In our Ephesians reading today, Paul talks about his work in sharing the Gospel with the Gentiles as a revealed mystery of faith. Paul also, like the Magi, like Martin Luther and Calvin and like people still today, were following the embodied truth of God revealed in Christ. A revelation based in faith, hope and love, not fear and punishment. I encourage all of us, to always be seekers of God's mystery of faith, follow the star and be willing to go on a spiritual quest. Explore the questions in your heart, try new ways of encountering the Divine, listen to the faith journey of others. Even when organized religion fails us, we still know how to follow the Star of God, look up. On my own Journey of faith, I wondered if I had strayed from the truth, but I am confident that God has continued to guide me, reassuring me I am on the right road home.

As I said in the beginning, I am known as the human GPS. Once I have a good sense of my surroundings and the most common route from point A to point B I often like to check out alternate routes to see what I find along the way. I love the final words of this reading. "The Magi left for their home by another road." There are times on our journey of faith when we want or may need to deviate from the prescribed path set before us and explore other routes home. We need to let go of our fears, and let curiosity and adventure guide us. Trusting that God is in fact guiding us deeper into our relationship with the Divine. As David Frost's famous poem says, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

God has given us a north star in Jesus Christ to guide us home, We can always look up and get our bearings where we can see that star as our guide. I too am on this journey of faith and hope we can be companions on the road, learning from one another the mysteries of Faith found in Jesus this day.

As we like to say around here, "Whoever you are and wherever you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."

Prayers for:

Helen Dorgan – cancer concerns

Bob and Shirley Feighner – Health concerns

Carole Therriault and Kim Krestakos (Carole's son died)

Lois Beckering – back pain

Lu Bertotti - Death of husband

Shelly Binder - health concerns

Ed Bolt - chemo

Polly Cox - Health concerns

Jon March - recovering from back surgery

Frances Spitler - health concerns

Amy Brooks - health concerns and recovery

Petra Woods - Healing

#### MEMBERS IN NURSING HOMES

Nancy Freyermuth

Sue Krebs (Sue is now in Hospice care)

Jim Pierson

Ann Slade