

"A FORK IN THE ROAD"

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Matthew 2:1-12

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The three wise men, or three kings, or the magi. Over the centuries we have made much about these travelers, these seemingly indispensable parts of the Christmas story. They have come to take a place of prominence around the manger on most Christmas pageants, never mind that they were not present for the birth but came to visit a number of years later. Matthew, the only gospel which mentions their visit at all, doesn't say that there were only three, or that they were ever kings, but only that they were from the east, gentiles from the east who happened to notice a new star and followed that star, for with the star came a prophecy of the birth of a king. Most likely they were Zoroastrian priests, who were called magi, so let's call them that, magi. Perhaps out of curiosity more than anything else, the magi came in search for this king. But of course, they had no idea of where to look. They were not familiar with the old Jewish prophecies; they had only heard that this star announced an important birth. So they went to the only logical place, they went to Jerusalem. They went to the seat of power in the area at the time. They went to where the people in the know would have been. And there they asked their question, ***"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"***

The gospel records Herod's response as being frightened and all Jerusalem with him. Frightened, that sounds a bit too polite. I think the gospel writer probably couldn't print what Herod really felt. The King of the Jews? If there was such a thing during a time of occupation, surely Herod himself was the one. Herod, frightened, but not out of his wits, gathered the priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Christ was to be born. Having been told that the messiah would be born in Bethlehem, Herod calmly told the magi to go to Bethlehem, to search carefully for the child, and when he was found, to report his whereabouts back to him so that he too might go and worship. There was evil in Herod's heart as he sent the magi on their way, an evil which would end up in the deaths of many young boys born in Bethlehem, but the magi couldn't have suspected anything out of the ordinary.

Up to this point everything about the magi's journey had been utterly predictable. They had discovered a star. They had heard that this star heralded a birth. They followed the star to where it led them, to Jerusalem. They sought out those in authority to find more precise information. They were granted an audience with the king of the region, fitting for such noble visitors from afar. The king seems to have extended to them every courtesy, including putting his very best people on the job, discovering that their search would lead them to Bethlehem. And the king wished to be notified of their discovery, so that he too might extend his worship to this king of the Jews. And so the magi continued to Bethlehem where they indeed found

the child, the Christ, the messiah. Upon entering the house, they bowed down and worshiped the child, offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ***But as they prepared to return to their home, something extraordinary happened.*** Instead of returning back to Herod and reporting the location of the child, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and they returned to their country by another way. ***What had been a predictable journey has now changed.*** Instead of reporting what they had found to the authorities of the land, these magi chose to listen to God speaking to them in a dream. I ask you, if we were among the magi and were asked by a king, the legal king of the land, to report to him what we had found on our journey, but we also were warned in a dream by an unfamiliar God to go back a different way, would we dare disobey the request of the king and obey something from a dream?

What these magi did took courage. It took courage and conviction to disregard Herod's request. They could have easily been spotted leaving the country without reporting back to Herod. Herod no doubt had his spies everywhere. They could have faced serious consequences for their actions. But they chose to listen to God in a dream, rather than do what a real, live, flesh and blood king had asked them to do. ***The only way to account for this behaviour is to suggest that when these magi found the Christ child, something became very obvious to them; a truth about God became clearer to them than it had ever been before. They were willing to risk their lives on this conviction, on this faith. In a way these magi were the first converts of Christ.*** They came as gentiles, ignorant of the Jewish prophecies, but they left as those changed by their encounter with Jesus, confronted by a fork in what had been to that point a one path road, and deciding to follow another way home.

Isn't it always the case that when we have been confronted by the reality of the Messiah, of the Christ, of the Son of God, that suddenly the paths of our lives, paths which seemed so clear and unambiguous, become forks in the road? If we have truly encountered the babe in the manger at Christmas, if we have truly been open to the reality of Jesus the Christ, the messiah in our lives, ***then it's unavoidable that like the magi who sought the king of the Jews, we too will be confronted by the possibility of another way.***

The paths of our lives, often seem to us as highways with no exit ramps, with little or no possibility of turning, crowded, congested paths which we feel compelled to travel, along with so many others in our society, for there seems to be no other way. ***But when we have encountered Jesus, suddenly these paths are no longer prisons of inevitability, and because of the reality of the Christ child our predictable paths have become forks in the road.***

As we come upon this first Sunday of the new year the truth for us in Jesus Christ, the child of Bethlehem, is that there is always another way. ***Our paths are not inevitable, predictable, there are forks in our road and we are called to choose.*** Conventional wisdom dictates that the magi would ignore their dreams and respond to cold, hard, reality. Conventional wisdom

dictates that the magi return to Herod, tell him where the Christ child is and Herod promptly sends a garrison to wipe out this pretender to his throne. ***But God doesn't buy into conventional wisdom.*** Conventional wisdom does not have a holy God loving a broken creation so much that he chooses to redeem that creation by being born into it. Conventional wisdom does not see the son of God being born to a young, virgin, without power, without privilege, without position. Conventional wisdom sees a straight path with no possibility of turning. ***God sees a path full of forks in the road. There is another way; our paths are not without choices.***

That's why at this time of the season new year's resolutions are so common. It may not be according to conventional wisdom, but we make resolutions at this time of the year, resolutions which dream big, which imagine what could be, not only what probably will be. We resolve to lose weight when in all probability we won't. We resolve to quit our habits which harm our health, drinking, smoking, poor diet, when in all probability we won't. We resolve to be more disciplined, more organized, spend more time with those who are important, make every moment count, but end up doing exactly what we've always done, rushing around at the last moment, kicking ourselves because of lost opportunities, getting to know one another only in a very superficial way. ***Many of us may not come close to keeping our new year's resolutions, but in the making of them we are affirming that our paths are not prisons of inevitability, but that there are forks in the road, that there is always the possibility of another way.***

Nobel Prize winning poet T.S. Eliot, after 40 years of academic and literary recognition, but finding himself going from one nervous breakdown to the next, saw that his path was not inevitable and made the decision to become a Christian. He came to a fork in the road and chose another way. Though he was questioned for his decision by those close to him, and though his decision to embrace Christianity would later threaten to challenge his reputation as a literary giant, he chose another way. And in doing so wrote perhaps the preeminent poetic description of the story of the magi. In "***The Journey of the Magi***," Eliot writes of the magi's encounter with the Christ and how they were forever changed as a result. It also has been suggested that the poem describes his conversion and how Eliot's life was forever changed. Eliot ends his poem this way,

***"All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for Birth or Death?
There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt.
I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different;
this Birth was Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.***

***We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death."***

The birth of the Christ child became like a death to the magi, the death of their old ways. They returned to their kingdoms by another way, ***but when they returned, they were no longer at ease in the old dispensation.*** Things had changed and changed forever. They were presented with a fork in the road and they took another way.

Is it that way with us? As we move quickly into the new year, as we open up to new possibilities, has anything changed for us with the birth of the Christ child? Have our straight paths suddenly become forks in the road? ***Like Eliot have we become people who are no longer at ease in our old dispensation?*** Have we become more acutely sensitive to the alienness of this world to us, even to the point of being able to say that I should be glad of another death? Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we end our lives because of our alienation from this world, far from it, we are called to live and serve God in this world. But the point is not lost. Those who have tasted the truth of the gospel, those who have worshiped at the foot of the Christ child, we know that there can be nothing so beautiful or glorious as an eternity spent in his presence. ***That time will come, but this time is upon us now.***

This New Year is upon us already. And as people who have been encountered by God in the incarnation of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, the child of Christmas, the Messiah, we know that our world is full of forks in the road. ***Nothing is inevitable, we have the freedom to choose another way.***

I think of the year just past and I know that the Covid-19 global pandemic has been the dominant story. The pandemic, beyond how it impacted the health and welfare of everyone in the world, ***also revealed other insights.*** We have learned to do things in new ways, like how to create community when you can't be physically together, how to be the church without a building to gather in. We've learned to work differently, to pursue relationships in a new way, to approach what we value and what we would sacrifice for with new eyes. We have come to appreciate people in ways we never did before, to no longer take for granted those who work so faithfully and diligently, often in harm's way, mostly without acknowledgement. We have remembered just how valuable time with those we love really is, especially when we have been restricted from being able to spend that time, with our parents and grandparents, with our children and grandchildren. ***We've come to see and imagine options and opportunities we never have before.***

Has God been present in the events of the last year, in the midst of the pandemic? ***Of course, God has been.*** God has been present in helping us to respond to the pandemic in ways that have put the needs of others before our own; by the way strangers have found solidarity in caring for those whose needs have left them even more vulnerable than before. God has been present in reassuring those who have felt the sting of loss that even in that loss, there is still hope, there is always hope. God has been present in the resiliency of people, the growth in compassion and the depths to which people will sacrifice their perceived individual rights for the needs of the greater whole. ***God has been present in our times of alone-less and loneliness, in our moments of frustration and fear, in our temptation to anger and outrage, and God has reassured us, calmed us, been present for us, brought patience to us, loved us, always loved us.***

As a society we can seek to recover our comfort, or we can be ill at ease in our old dispensation. We can look at the world around us, the suffering, the pain, the loneliness, the injustice, the poverty, the hunger, the abuse, the neglect, the fractured relationships, and we can conclude that it doesn't concern us, or we can conclude that we can no longer be comfortable while other children of God suffer, when we can do something about it.

Sure, there will be dangers. There always is when one chooses to follow God. Just as Herod became furious when the magi failed to report, we too will face the response of evil and danger. ***But God never asks us to follow a path where God isn't present. Our lives need not be prisons of inevitability.*** There are forks in our roads, there is another way. ***And it is the way that Christ has already walked. Do not be afraid! We are called not to blaze our own trail in unmarked territory, but to follow where Christ has already gone.*** The New Year beckons, for us and for the community of Christ's church, for our world. For those who are uneasy in the old dispensation, God offers a fork in the road.

I don't know what the New Year holds exactly for you or for us together, but I do know that nothing is ever inevitable, nothing is ever unavoidable. There is another way available to us. The world is returning to full speed after the season of Christmas, if it hasn't already. ***But as we return from the manger, from kneeling around the Christ child, I pray that the reality of Jesus' birth, in Bethlehem those many years ago, and in our hearts this very year, would be strong enough and sure enough in our lives that we too would choose to return to our world and live by another way.***

May God richly bless you and us together in this New Year and always.

Amen.