

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Feast of the Epiphany – January 2, 2022
Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year... I think.

It doesn't really feel like a new year, does it? In fact, our worship this morning feels like déjà vu, like we've gone back in time. For the first time since we reopened our sanctuary doors for worship in June, I suspect we may have more folks joining us virtually than in-person. I'm back to double masking, abstaining from dining in restaurants, avoiding going to the movies, or doing just about anything that requires I share indoor space for more than an hour. It feels a like we've lost ground – that we are no longer moving forward, but rather backward. What sort of journey is this?

Now, you may not be surprised to learn that I am the sort of person who hates to back-track. If I miss the exit for the rest-stop on the highway – too bad, because I *never* circle back. Everyone just has to hold it until the next opportunity comes along. I carefully plan my errands so that I never cover the same ground twice. I am highly efficient in this regard and can be quite unforgiving of unnecessary stops and extra ground covered on my journeys.

But not all journeys in life can be as carefully planned and precisely executed as I would like. Organizing my route for running errands may be simple. So too, planning a travel route for a vacation. Journeying the pathways of life and the heart, on the other hand, are often much less so. These routes, if faithfully followed, will likely be way more messy and convoluted – littered as they are with side-trips, detours, and circling back. The lived experience of these journeys are that things are not usually clear and unequivocal. There is nothing efficient or precise about the journey of life and love. The human condition is messy.

I've been thinking about journeying the long and winding roads of the heart this Christmastide. Responding to the emperor's decree, Mary and Joseph traveled the dusty roads from Nazareth to Bethlehem, even as Mary was heavy with pregnancy and the birth of Jesus imminent. After being awakened by the shocking Angel's proclamation, shepherds traveled the fields and dirt paths to find the Christ child in a manger. And today, we remember the story of the Gentile wise men from the East, who having seen the star rising, traveled great distances, trusting the inner compass of their hearts, to find and bring gifts to the Messiah, the savior of all.

These wise men are usually referred to as the Magi, the use of this term refers not so much to their being magicians as to astrologers who studied the heavens for signs of significant events. These were learned men who not only saw the appearance of the rising star, but also recognized the importance of it, and who journeyed over great distances trusting that following the direction to which the star had pointed would bring them to the one they sought.

The journey of the magi was most certainly a journey of faith. Scholars estimate that that it probably took weeks, if not many months, to travel from Persia or Babylonia, where they most likely called home. To travel such great distances based upon interpretations of a rising star, is remarkable. For there must have been many long periods of time in which the star was a dim and uncertain signpost. And yet, as with Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, the Magi were willing to respond to the call to journey – stepping forward in faith.

It seems that, as with Abraham with Sarah, God continually calls his beloved children to leave the relative safety of home and journey into the unknown, and often the destination is unclear. Rarely does God call us to something easy and unambiguous – to a sure thing. Rather God most frequently calls us to journey in faith into places unknown, seeking and following heavenly signposts wherever they may appear.

The journey of the Magi was also a journey of the heart – a journey toward God; a journey inward. They followed an uncertain map – one illuminated by dim star light and guided perhaps more by intuition and faith than anything else. I believe this is also how our own faith journeys are

traveled. We too must step forward in faith, believing that the doors we come upon will continue to open to paths that draw us closer to the One we seek.

Pondering all this, I am reminded of my favorite poetic blessing for Epiphany by Jan Richardson from her book *Circle of Grace*. In it, Richardson reimagines the journey of the Magi as the communal and individual journeys we all make toward God. I ask that you indulge me in reading it to you this morning. The poem is called, **The Map you Make for Yourself**.

You have looked at so many doors with longing,
wondering if your life lay on the other side.
For today, choose the door that opens to the inside.
Travel the most ancient way of all:
the path that leads you to the center of your life.
No map but the one you make yourself.
No provision but what you already carry
and the grace that comes to those who walk the pilgrim's way.
Speak this blessing as you set out and watch how your rhythm slows,
the cadence of the road drawing you into the pace that is your own.
Eat when hungry.
Rest when tired.
Listen to your dreaming.
Welcome detours as doors deeper in.
Pray for protection.
Ask for guidance.
Offer gladness for the gifts that come,
and then let them go.
Do not expect to return by the same road.
Home is always by another way,
and you will know it not by the light that waits for you
but by the star that blazes inside you,
telling you that where you are is holy
and that you are welcome here.

I especially love the lines in the final stanza: "Do not expect to return by the same road. Home is always by another way, and you will know it not by the light that waits for you but by the star that blazes inside you." Like the Magi, who return home transformed from their encounter with the Christ child, we are forever changed by our encounter with Emmanuel, God-with-us. And the journey home is always by another way. No star in the sky is needed to illuminate that journey, rather we will follow the star that burns within us.

This is what our Epiphany story gives us today. This work of God in Christ is a mystery that, once encountered, will forever change us. Seeking and finding the gift given us in Christ will turn our fundamental understanding of life inside-out and nothing will look the same again. And embarking from this encounter, we are certain to journey by another road.

This Christmastide, we witnessed the passing of South African Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. If ever there was a man who knew the uncertain and intuitive journeying of the heart, it was Archbishop Tutu. Dedicated pastor, preacher, and teacher, he was a joyful and ebullient apostle of racial justice and reconciliation who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his nonviolent struggle against the systemic oppression of apartheid. And through it all, he retained his sense of joy and wonder in all God's works.

Like many of you, I've read numerous eulogies of Archbishop Tutu this week and have been reminded not only of all that he's done but of his great wisdom, steady moral compass, and hope in God's reconciling love for his beloved creatures. One of my favorite quotes of this great traveler of the faith journey, is, I think, particularly relevant on this beginning of our third pandemic year: "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness."

Archbishop Tutu, like the Magi, and all who traveled the winding and dusty roads of faith, trained the eyes of his heart to seek and follow the light of the star that burns within. May we who follow in their footsteps, take courage in their journeys to choose the door that opens to the inside and travel the most ancient way of all: the path that leads you to the center of your life.

Let us pray,

All gracious and loving God, in the blessings that abound in this New Year, may we dare to seek and encounter in our lives your Word made flesh; may we have the courage to notice and follow even your faintest of lights; and may we be forever changed, being transformed into the likeness of Christ. All this we pray in the name of your Son, our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.