

January 5, 2025
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany
The Road Is Not Straight

If life is a journey, the beginning of a new year encourages us to pull over to the side and look back at where we've been before we continue along the road. As a community, we have found ourselves in some very joyful places...celebrating our 60th birthday, welcoming new members and friends, serving our neighbors, and learning from each other and the world around us. Sometimes as we look back, we see some places we hope we don't have to revisit. We've seen some of those together--- presidential election ugliness, the deaths of dear ones, and at times struggling to live into who we say we are. Each of us has our own journey to look back on. For me, after my mom's death, I found myself in a place where instead of allowing myself to grieve, I sort of put my feelings away in a box. I found out later in the year that it is really hard to keep the lid on a box like that closed.

It opens unexpectedly...kind of like a jack-in-the box. And let's be honest, nobody likes jack-in-the boxes. The clowns, like most clowns, are creepy. Because I don't want to visit that place again, I've found some gentler ways toward healing which is a windy road that tends to circle back to where I started every once in a while.

What about you? Where did 2024 take you? Did it take you to places you hope to never land again? I don't think it's a bad idea to look back and reflect on even the painful places we visited last year. Sometimes we get so busy living and just trying to survive that we don't give ourselves a chance to acknowledge how our experiences impact us. Not one of us is the same as we were when 2024 started. And all of us made it through every hard day we encountered in 2024.

The start of a new year is also a moment to look ahead to where we would like to go in 2025. Notice the way I phrased that. I did not say "look ahead to where we are going." The truth is, we don't know where we are going, but most of us know where we would like to go.

The hard thing about life's journey is that it does not come with a Google Earth app. We don't know what's coming on the road ahead beyond what we can see right now. And that feels a little scary sometimes. But, for me many of the important milestones and experiences that have been significant in my life did not happen because I planned them or even expected them. They happened because I said yes to a path I hadn't planned on and, like all paths, I couldn't always see what was ahead. Regardless of how well we plan, that is true for all of us.

Too often, I think, we've gotten the idea that a "successful" life is a well-controlled, well-planned linear one. We've been given the idea that there is an order to how life should go and if we veer from that, if things don't happen the way we planned or

thought they would happen, we are doing it wrong. But yet, our experiences have taught us that life is often one detour after another. Things happen that change our path. We meet people who walk with us and together we decide to make a left turn, right turn, or even a U-turn. Sometimes we even make our own path. The point is the road, both behind us and ahead of us, is not straight. It is not flat. It is not smooth. It is often not easy.

Rev. Sarah Speed wrote a poem that resonated with me about that. It's called "Field Notes."

With tears in your eyes,
you name all the bumps
and zigzags your life has taken.

With clenched teeth
and a hummingbird pulse,
you wake up
and wonder—how did I get here?

In the last 40 days of
desert wandering, you say
you haven't heard God's voice once.
You say you miss when God was close,
when God used to sing the harmony line.

So you yell at the sky,
begging God to drop a pin,
to name the road,
to draw you a map.
You lament the way this life isn't easy.

You ask me—was the road ever straight and narrow,
or was that all a lie?

But then you crest the mountain,
and I don't hear from you for a while,
because God was growing
in the lilac field
on the other side of the hill.

God was scattered
among the pebbles
of the road you never planned to take.

Isn't it amazing, you say,

there are a million roads home
and God walks every single one of them.

Poem by Rev. Sarah A. Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org

In today's story, the magi are on a journey together when they, too, discover that there is more than one road home. Their road wasn't straight, it had twists and turns, some of them a bit dangerous, but they paid attention and followed the light. These mysterious strangers found what they were seeking, they took a new path, and it too, led them home.

This is Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

To understand this story, we have to delve a bit into who these magi might have been. I've heard people joke that they were definitely not women. If they had been, the gifts would have been useful things like diapers and wipes, not some hard metal and perfume. And based on the popular Epiphany song, "We Three Kings," we could assume they were not only men but royalty. And that last part, at least, would be wrong. Regardless of what the songwriters tell us, the magi were not kings and that is an important detail.

In the ancient world, kings were not known for their open-mindedness, curiosity, and wisdom-seeking. They were generally known for their wealth, power, and protection of their own interests. When the author of the Gospel of Matthew wrote this story, he likely had in mind Zoroastrian priests whose lives were spent observing the sky for signs of revelation and wisdom. They were lifelong seekers who believed that the answers to their questions and longings were found in the natural world, specifically in the sky. In their creation story, the sky was the first to be created and the sky is where their god, Ahura Mazda resides. The journey of the magi would not have been specifically to discover a king, the search would have been mystical — ultimately, a search for wisdom, a search for an “epiphany.”

This tale paints a vivid, adventuresome picture of these wisdom seekers. Guided by dreams and stars, the magi’s journey was filled with a dangerous royal encounter and unforeseen detours. I imagine they were the kind of people who were very comfortable with winding paths, and uncertainty. They were open to new possibilities and new ideas. They expected they would just figure it out as they went. And the sky would guide them. They saw the star and they followed it. They were told in a dream to go another way, so they did.

Their royal encounter was with King Herod and like most kings of the day, he had no interest in considering “what could be.” His gut told him that everything and everyone was a threat to his position and power. Certainly, the last thing he would want to hear about was a baby born to be king. He was the king. Period. As I imagine what an encounter between Herod and the magi would be like, I wonder, would the magi have felt a chill go up their spines, a sign of danger to come? Would they have left the king and said to each other, “That guy is a power-hungry nut.” I bet their dreams just confirmed what they already knew...Herod was the villain in this story and he had no intention of going to honor that baby. In his mind, if anyone was to be honored, it was him.

While Herod sat on his throne afraid, the magi followed the light and found that something sacred had happened. The Holy had come to earth and they found light and love and joy. So what if Mary and Joseph’s god was different from theirs? They knew Love when they saw it. And that love was for the whole world, even mysterious strangers.

Here in the first week of 2025, we can learn from this ancient story. Like the magi, we are all seeking. What are you seeking in 2025? Joy? Peace? Security? Love? Relationship? Whatever you are seeking, the story of the magi challenges us to take the first step. And not to be afraid to change course when we realize what we seek isn’t down the path we are on. This story reminds us that we aren’t completely on our own. The Light of Love goes with us and illuminates the path. And when it feels like the path has gotten dark, that’s when we need each other. Our call is to reflect the light so that the journeys of our friends and family and neighbors isn’t so scary.

You see, like the magi, we bring gifts to the Holy as well. The gifts we bring are in our care for one another, in our walking together and lighting up the path when it seems dark. And I am wondering too if part of lighting up that path may be to remind each other that the way of the Light is kindness. The way of the Light is compassion. The way of the Light is generosity. The way of the light is love for ourselves and love for our neighbors. It is helping each other onto a path that will guide us to whatever we seek this year. If 2024 put you on a path that isn't for you, you can choose to "go home by another way." And we will all go with you.

May you rest in the hope that you never truly go alone---the love that knows your name goes alongside you and before you. And may this knowledge bring you courage and help you to be open to the new and unexpected paths that will be revealed to you this year.

One of the ways new paths have been revealed to some of us over the years is through Star Words. Star Words invite us to connect with the story of the magi, to embrace our own seeking, and start the new year thinking new thoughts.

We recognize that it is easy to miss sacredness in our daily lives. Having a Star Word to reflect on throughout the year and at the end of the year as you look back, invites us to consider new perspectives and new ways in which we connect to Love, to each other, and to our true selves.

We know that the most common prayer practice for many of us involves speaking to God as opposed to listening to what God is saying to us. Many of us are uncomfortable with silence, stillness, and contemplation. Star Words invite a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful new practice and point of growth.

By not looking at or sorting through the star words at their selection, we practice the spiritual task of receiving. It is not we who are in control at this moment. Instead, we trust that our word will find us and accompany us on the twists and turns of the new year. We let go of our desire to cultivate or control.

The stars are placed face-down in the baskets. When you come forward for communion, you will be invited to also receive a Star Word. You can draw your word yourself or Anna or I will draw it for you. I encourage you to trust the word that you draw or are given. Remember, we are trying to be like the magi this year, open to new paths knowing that the Light of Love goes with us wherever we go. Amen.