

Going Home a Different Way

Matthew 2:1-12

You may have been surprised to find us singing Christmas songs this morning. Maybe you were not surprised, because you have been around long enough to know that we might be doing Christmas songs in July. There are a couple of reasons for doing them today. First, we need to understand and appreciate that Advent will not be over until our expectation of the coming of Christ is fulfilled in His second coming, and that our celebration of Christmas is just practice for the celebration that will happen then. That is important enough that I think it is worth saying again. Advent will not be over until our expectation of the coming of Christ is fulfilled in His second coming, and our celebration of Christmas is just practice for the celebration that will happen then. We must be people of Advent all the time, expecting and anticipating the coming of Christ until that day.

The second reason for doing Christmas songs today is that we are observing Epiphany today – the traditional observance of the coming of the Magi to the Christ child, as recounted in the Scripture passage for today.

READ Matthew 2:1-12

Anybody who has traveled with me on a trip of any distance, like more than just around town, knows that we are not likely to go and come by the same route. There are a lot of ways to get from one place to another, and it is just too boring to take the same path both ways. There are at least 3 different ways to get to Gainesville, Tallahassee, Valdosta, or Jacksonville. The farther you go, the more different routes become possible. My family has no idea which of the various routes we are going to take when we get in the car. Sometimes I don't know either. That might bother less adventurous people, but my family is used to it. Whichever way we go, we will almost always come home by another route.

I do that mostly for variety and a little bit of adventure. The Magi had more important reasons for going home by another route.

We really don't know a whole lot about the Magi. We don't know how many there were, though we assume there were three because Matthew says they brought three

gifts. We don't know where they came from, except that they were from somewhere east of Israel. We don't know when they showed up, or how long they stayed. We don't know their names or how they traveled. Here's something we know for sure: They went home by another route.

They went home by another route for reasons far more significant than variety or adventure.

We know that they went home by another route because they listened to God. They had come in the first place because they listened to God, and sought out the one whom God had sent. They were looking at the same stars that everybody else was looking at, but because their hearts and minds were open to God, they saw God's leading in those stars. They put aside whatever would hold them back from responding to God, and packed their stuff and followed the direction God gave them. They remained open to God and heard God's warnings about Herod. Their openness to God's direction led them home by another route.

They did not just go home by a different route – they went home different people. They were changed by their encounter with Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God. They experienced the great joy of His presence, they worshipped Him, and they were changed. Going home by a different route was nothing compared to going home different people.

The Magi were not the first people to be changed by encountering Jesus Christ – the shepherds had already been there, not to mention Mary and Joseph. Even Mary's relative Elizabeth had been changed by an encounter with Jesus before His birth when the pregnant Mary had come to her home, and the baby who would be John the Baptist leapt inside Elizabeth. We could go through the whole story of the life and ministry of Jesus and make a very long list of people who were changed by their encounter with Jesus Christ. Start with Simeon and Anna at the Temple when Jesus was presented there, and the scholars who talked with Him at the age of twelve, and John the Baptist when Jesus came to him to be baptized, and Nicodemus, and the Samaritan woman at the well, and the people He healed, and the thousands that He fed from a boy's lunch, and Zacchaeus,

and Pilate's wife. We could go on and on with this list. Nobody who encountered Jesus Christ came away unchanged. Nobody.

Then there were the 500 people who personally encountered the risen Christ after the Resurrection. And all those who were present on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came on them like tongues of fire. It is through that Holy Spirit – God with us – that we still experience the power of encountering Jesus Christ. There we connect to the experience of the Magi.

Like the Magi, we are called to the presence of God. The ways in which we are called to that presence are as many and varied as we are. We are all looking at the same stars, but how many of us are open to seeing God in them? Who is listening for the call of God in all the noise of our lives? Wise people listened long ago, and still are.

Like the Magi, we are called to worship God where we experience Him. They were looking for a king in a palace and found a baby in a barn, and they worshipped Him there. Where are we looking for God? Where do we expect to experience Him? Not just in church, I hope. Of course we come to church expecting to experience God. Why else would we be here? We should always come here anticipating and expecting an experience of the presence of God. But most certainly, God is not just here. God is wherever we expect Him to be – and everywhere else. We should expect to experience God on the street and at home and at work and at school – even at WalMart. How could any place have been less likely for the Magi to experience God than a barn in a little country town, miles from the Temple, miles from a palace of any kind? God is expecting us all the time and every where, and we should expect Him in the same way.

Like the Magi, we are called to go home by a different route. We will be changed by our encounters with Him. All those examples from Scripture are just the tip of an enormous iceberg, because encounters with Him have never stopped, and will never stop for people who seek them and who are open to them. There are instruments of God's love and mercy and grace all around us and among us in the persons and lives and work of all those who know the love and mercy and grace of Jesus Christ. We encounter Him wherever and whenever we open ourselves to Him. The Magi knew they had

experienced God, and they knew they had been changed. They may not have understood it, but it wasn't necessary for them to understand – and it is not necessary for us to understand everything either. All that is necessary is for us to be willing to be changed. If we are unwilling to be changed, we will not be. If we have not been changed, we must be. Without that change, we are on the wrong route and we are not going home. Nobody who encounters Jesus Christ comes away unchanged. Nobody.

When we are open to His call, when we have heard and responded to His voice, when we have thrown aside all the baggage and junk that we have let pile up between us and Him, when we have experienced His love and mercy and forgiveness and grace – then we will take another route and turn toward home with Him, changed by the experience, closer every time to becoming the people that God made us to be.

Amen.