

“Taking Another Road”

Matthew 2:1-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be made bold and open to being changed by Christ’s arrival. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

It is a great gift to our tradition that our scriptures have not one, but four accounts of Jesus’ life. It is hard to imagine how things would be different, if we didn’t have multiple different angles on this story. Having multiple narratives forces us to hold the whole thing lightly; it imposes a posture of humility that is right and appropriate, but that we might not manage to pull off on our own if there were just one version. It’s not really in our nature to hold a multiplicity of things gracefully. The Christmas story is an excellent example of this. First of all, we have two of four gospels leaving out this part entirely. But then we’re left with Matthew and Luke telling the story in almost completely different ways, and what do we do? We smush it all together into one big nativity scene. You can see why we’ve done this over the centuries, but then if we take a moment to read just one version, you can also see how much we miss when do that.

For instance, did you notice that, according to Matthew, Jesus wasn’t “from” Nazareth? At least not originally. Tradition has decided that Jesus was a Galilean because of the way Luke tells the story, but Matthew doesn’t have Jesus living in Nazareth until after the family returns from exile in Egypt, meaning they were transplants to the area. The other thing, of course, that most often gets left out when we

smash Matthew and Luke together is what has historically been referred to as the “Massacre of the Innocents.” It doesn’t fit nicely into a pageant, and it certainly wouldn’t make for a cheery Christmas card. Indeed, the level of drama in the story Matthew tells demands our attention, for we would miss a huge part of the point of Christmas without it.

The gospel of Matthew is famous for its tendency to frame the life of Jesus with references to how the words of the prophets are being fulfilled by what happens to Jesus. We see this happen four times in chapter two alone. This can give us the impression that Matthew is a fairly conservative gospel, intent on demonstrating that Jesus is a continuation of tradition, the obvious next step to what God was doing earlier. But I would argue that it only seems that way to us because we’ve grown so used to the other parts of Matthew’s story, the parts that are actually quite radical, which Matthew is balancing out by putting them in the context of prophecy fulfillment.

When it comes down to it, the narrative offered in Matthew chapter 2 is a story about a power struggle. The power of earthly kings, enacted with subterfuge and violence, are set in juxtaposition to the power of God, which is carried out by outsiders and people on the run. Matthew’s Christmas story is a challenge. It is an invitation to us to open our hearts and our lives to change, so that we can join in with what God is doing in the world to protect the vulnerable.

Our focus today is the wise men, or as our Advent theme song calls them, the “sages.” “Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar. Seek the great

Desire of nations; you have seen the natal star,” we sang. The implication there is that the sages might have been tempted to stay in the academy, to indulge in the comforts and safety of their ivory tower, content to think and talk about what they see God doing in the world, without actually getting involved. But that’s not what they did, is it? No, they hit the road.

And once they did, they started to realize how little their preparation had actually taught them about what was going on. They’d seen the star and determined that it was heralding the birth of the King of the Jews. So logically, they decided to head to the Jewish capital, to check in and find out more. Except it turns out, this King of Jews wasn’t in the capital, nor was anyone in the capital excited to hear about his arrival. King Herod “was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” Herod was king, so another king wasn’t good news; it was a threat. The wise men tried to go through the proper channels, but in doing so, they became pawns for a violent tyrant whose goals were very different than their own.

And here’s where the important lesson comes in: the wise men held onto their agenda. They found the holy baby, and they offered their gifts – gifts with rich symbolism pointing to all this baby would be. We’ll learn more about that when we sing their song in a bit. And then rather than obeying the commands of the king and ratting out this baby they had come to worship, they pivoted. They listened to what the Spirit told them in a dream and went from being honored foreign diplomats to outside agitators. Those sages weren’t snitches! They changed their whole orientation to the

situation and realized they needed to take counter-measures to avoid being used as tools by a murderous regime. They took another road. They made a quiet exit out the back door, without another word to their royal host who was waiting on their report.

When Herod discovered the wise men had turned on him, he was furious, of course, not least because he was still terrified by the prospect of another king rising up. And here is where the story takes a tragic turn. A violent tyrant fueled by paranoia and fear is a dangerous thing for everyone, but especially those who are already vulnerable. “All the children in and around Bethlehem, who were two year old or under.” All of them. This wasn’t just about securing the throne. This was a furious expression of vengeance, enacted upon those it could be enacted upon because the true targets had escaped.

At this point, we have to stop and consider the awfulness of the question of why, if God could intervene with multiple angels and dreams to stop Herod from killing the Baby Jesus, why could God not intervene to keep the rest of the babies from being killed? There is no good answer to this question, only more questions and some possibilities to hope for. What if the wise men weren’t the only ones who saw through the dominant narrative and pivoted away to another road? Maybe there were descendants of the Hebrew midwives Shiprah and Puah, who dared to lie to Pharaoh’s face rather than obey his commands to kill the Hebrews’ baby boys. Maybe there were multiple instances of people spiriting babies out the back door, down a back road, under cover of night, so that lives were saved. We don’t have those stories. We can’t know;

we can only hope. But what we do know is that enough babies were not saved that the wailing and lamentation echoed through the streets.

And sadly, what we also know is that the wailing and lamentation have not stopped. Babies are still being massacred by murderous regimes. Wailing and lamentation is still heard in the streets of Ramah. Almost 17,000 children were killed in the first year of the war in Gaza. We ask why God won't intervene, and God presses us to think about whether we've sufficiently considered our own role in the situation. Are we still contemplating the pros and cons of the situation, unwilling to step onto Another Road because "it's complicated"? Have we pondered all the options we have for resisting the false narratives of violence?

Meanwhile, Matthew's drama just keeps coming, as the Holy Family become refugees. This story, of course, is another balancing act where Matthew is framing the new thing God is doing within the Jewish tradition, connecting the story of Multicolored Coat Joseph being taken as a slave into Egypt with this later Joseph finding asylum in Egypt for his little family. And even their return, some years later, has them migrating to find yet another home where they can be safe and settling down in Nazareth. This drama is a power struggle, between the earthly kings who rule through violence and oppression, and the ordinary people God calls to protect the vulnerable and targeted by finding the back doors and the back roads, pivoting away from empire to defend and shelter those fleeing violence.

The Christmas story in Matthew is a challenge. It is an invitation to leave our contemplations and hit the road. It is a call to recognize when it is time to find another road to get where we need to be. It is an opportunity to stop assuming we have to do what we're told and choose instead to do what is right. The Christmas story wants to strengthen our vision, so we can see more clearly how to follow Jesus by rejecting the logic of violence and instead protecting the vulnerable. In situations where God's people are being hurt, there is always another road we can choose to take, if only we have the wisdom and the courage to do so. May we follow the example of those ancient sages and dare to find a new path! Hallelujah and Amen!