

January 8, 2023
"The Road Less Traveled"
Isaiah 60:1-6 / Matthew 2:1-12
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

It's been a while since I got to preach an Epiphany sermon. The last time was three years ago, my first sermon as interim pastor following Pastor John's retirement. Little did we and the rest of the world know what was coming.

Two years ago, you may recall, we had a different pastor. And last year, no longer interim pastor, Lesley preached because I had taken that Sunday off to go to my uncle's funeral in Massachusetts – which ended up being limited to immediate family because of, you guessed it, the pandemic.

So I'm glad to be back again with the Epiphany story. It's a great story, the one Bruce just read for us from Matthew. A story only found in Matthew's account.

The word epiphany, of course, describes a moment of sudden revelation or insight – when we arrive at a place of clarity or certainty. In Western Christian liturgical tradition, Epiphany – officially celebrated on January 6th – immediately follows the 12 days of Christmas, and commemorates the revelation of God's presence manifested, incarnate, in the child Jesus. Son of God. Emmanuel. God with us.

Revelation, as Matthew's story indicates, to the gentile *magi* (in the original Greek). The foreign astrologers. The sages, as Wil Gafney's translation puts it. Traditionally understood as three wise men, though to be sure, there is no biblical basis for there being three, or grammatical basis that they were necessarily all men. Just sayin.

Epiphany commemorates this dramatic visit of the magi, the sages, to the place where Jesus was born. More broadly, Epiphany also commemorates the baptism of Jesus as God's beloved, typically celebrated on this first Sunday following January 6th. AND the first miracle Jesus performed – turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, as described in the Gospel of John. Those events further REVEALING Jesus' divine identity to the world.

Epiphany.

We don't know how these sages got word of Jesus' birth, or at least how or why a star was a sign for them about this particular child being born. We don't know why they traveled to Jerusalem looking for him, or why they felt compelled to reverence him.

This is the tone set by the author of Matthew's gospel, a tone of intrigue and mystery – with the baby Jesus, the Christ child, very much at the center of it all.

The author wants us to see Jesus, even as a newborn, attracting the attention both of Jewish priests and religious leaders, and non-Jewish sages and kings. Sages mysteriously drawn to him; a king curiously afraid of and threatened by him, already referred to as “king of the Judeans” – a title found only in the Gospels, and a title already held by King Herod.

That political tension, that threat, comes into play here, with Herod's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to find and kill the baby Jesus. And as we know, it will come into play again as the grounds for Jesus' arrest and crucifixion.

The road the sages travel to find the newborn Jesus is revealed to them by the star at its ascent. The star rising and ultimately stopping, we're told, over the place where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. We know what happens after that, with their rejoicing. With their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they've come all that way to deliver.

But I'm drawn this time around the Epiphany story to the road they travel to get back home.

We know from our reading that Herod asks them to return to him after they find Jesus, so they can tell him where he is. We don't know, and THEY don't know at that point, that Herod actually intends to kill him, and so warned in a dream, a DREAM, they don't go back to Herod. They don't go back the way they came. They go by another road. The road less traveled. The road that LITERALLY changes the narrative.

I love that dreams are the thread that hold Matthew's birth narrative together.

As we explored a few weeks ago, an angel visited Joseph in a dream before Jesus was born, affirming the courageous, faithful role that Joseph will play as Mary's husband and Jesus' stepfather.

Then we get this dream of the sages, prompting them to leave for their own country by another road. And then Joseph has two more divine dreams – one directing the holy family to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's murderous plot, and the other directing them to return from Egypt after King Herod's death.

So perhaps there's something to be found in these stories, in this story of the sages, about letting our dreams guide our steps? Letting our dreams set our courses. Letting our divine dreams – the ones revealed in the deepest parts of ourselves, where love takes root and flourishes – direct us in the way to go.

We live in a world, do we not, where the roads we travel are so often determined by – and so, limited by – reality as it is? As we know it?

By the status quo. By prevailing and often false narratives. By assumptions made about others or that others make about us. By cultural rules and religious doctrines. By social and economic expectations and pressures. By the confines of capitalism, say, and the destructive, soul-sucking emphasis on individual security and advancement at the expense of the common good. By social and political division, conflict, violence. By social location. By racial and economic privilege, or lack thereof. By gender and gender-normative and hetero-normative privilege, or lack thereof. On and on.

We can easily get stuck traveling the same roads over and over again, roads dictated by forces outside ourselves. Predictable roads. Roads we know, whether we like them or not. Roads that lead us down the same old storyline.

It makes sense. It's practical. For many, for most, even necessary as a matter of survival.

But this time around the Epiphany story, I hear the divine invitation NOT TO SETTLE for the predictable roads, the roads we USUALLY take or ALWAYS take, the ones that lead us BACK, again and again, to the status quo in our own lives and in our relationships and in

our communities and in the world. To the way things are and presumably always will be. To the realities we've come to accept as foregone and final.

Maybe that's the invitation, the revelation, to be found in the Epiphany story? To take the road less traveled. To find our individual and collective way home by another road.

And to do so by daring to follow the dreams, deep down, that lead us there. That lead us forward, not back. That lead us to love more fully and consistently. That lead us to change the narrative – because in order to change the way things are, we have to be willing to go a different way.

Love is the way to love. Peace is the way to peace. Justice is the way to justice.

These are the dreams we have for ourselves and our own lives, for how we want to be in the world. The dreams we have for our families and friends, for our relationships and our communities and our congregations. The dreams we have for this city, for our country, for the world, for the planet – dreams for restorative justice and lasting peace. Dreams where everyone has enough. Where no one is hungry or unhoused or alone. Dreams where everyone has space and opportunity to live into THEIR dreams.

As Rev. Dr. William Barber often says, in co-directing the national Poor People's Campaign, "Forward together, not one step back. Forward together, not one step back."

Not one step back toward the way we came, the way we always go, the way of self-fulfilling prophecy that can only take us back to the way things are – and so the way things will inevitably always be. But forward together toward the way of love, toward the world as it should be for ALL people and ALL creation, as God intends.

This is our Epiphany, friends: Dream together. Love together. Forward together. Home together. This is our covenant with God. This is, in fact, the way of Christ. The way still, STILL TO THIS DAY, so threatening to the powers that be. To the status quo.

Now I want to acknowledge here that I am not being concrete. I am not taking the time to share concrete examples, but we all know them. They're all over the place if we look closely enough.

So I would invite you – later today, this week – to bring those examples to mind. To think of experiences where you have, or to think of people you know OR KNOW OF who have, refused to concede to reality and instead let the dream of what might yet be lead and make the way. Until the dream becomes reality, at least in part. In big and small ways.

Bring those examples to mind, and while you're at it, bring to mind your dreams for yourself and your own life, for your relationships, for your neighborhoods, for the world.

And this Epiphany, may you, like the magi, be the ones wise enough to pay attention to your dreams. May we be the ones courageous enough to go where our dreams, all part of God's dream, lead us.

May we travel the roads, and BE the roads, that ultimately change the narrative. May our revelation lead to revolution.

As Jan Richardson offers in blessing:

*May the path
that Christ walks
to bring justice
upon the earth,
to bring light
to those who sit
in darkness,
to bring out those
who live in bondage,
to bring new things
to all creation:*

*may this path
run through our life.
May we be the road Christ takes.*

May it be so.