

“A Star Will Only Get You So Far”
January 9, 2022

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Well, here we go again: another new year begins, dragging the pandemic from the past year along with it. On the one hand, this can be discouraging. On the other hand, we’ve been through this before so maybe we know something of what to do.

Or maybe not.

Oh, yes, get vaccinated and boosted—most, if not all, of you who are watching this worship service have done that. Mask up—you do that, too; and consider upgrading that mask and make sure you’re wearing it correctly. Keep vigilant about social distance and hand washing, even though you’re tired of it.

We know what to do.

But, like those Magi, whose story we heard once again this morning, we don’t know everything.

We’re not quite sure where we are going or how we are going to get there.

Poets have long characterized the journey of the Magi as arduous.

T.S. Eliot imagined one of them recalling:

“A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.”...

Somewhat like those Magi, we are on a *long* journey. So, we are helped this morning by this familiar story.

As with so many stories in the Bible, we hear something new each time we listen to them. And what we learn this year is that a star only gets you so far.

By the light of that star, the Magi make it to Jerusalem, the capital city of Judea. They are looking for a child who has been born as a king, so this would be the place, right?

No.

The astrologers consult the skies.

The religious leaders consult the scriptures.

They find, not Jerusalem but “Bethlehem, in the land of Judah.” There they will find the One who comes as a ruler to shepherd the people.

A star only gets them so far, but with the star, with the scriptures, they make their way to their destination. They find the child whom they seek.

And then they change direction. They were to return to Herod. But they go home by a different road, a path of their own choosing, neither shown by the stars or revealed by the scriptures.

It is that different road that interests me and enlightens all of us this year.

A couple of weeks ago, I was looking out the window in my office when I saw a car heading west on Jefferson St. For those who are not acquainted with the finer points of Iowa City streets, Jefferson St. is, of course, a one-way street going *east*. The driver must have realized this because at the intersection, the car turned north on Clinton St.

This isn't the first time I've watched such a scene. I'd say I see this at least twice a year—and those are just the times when I happen to be in the office and looking out the window. It probably happens much more often than I see it.

The good news is that I've never seen an accident resulting from these incidents. Other drivers seem to be alert and on the look-out. Those who are going the wrong way will sometimes make a U-turn, or back up, or, as I saw recently, simply turn onto another street.

It's surprising, but who am I to judge? After all, the first time I was in Iowa City, passing through here on our way to visit friends in Nebraska in the late '80's, I was stopped by a police officer because, well, because *I* was going the wrong way—either on Jefferson St. or one block over on Market.

I mean, these things happen, right?

We lose our way.

We're not sure if we're on the right road or going in the right direction.

We can have this feeling in our personal lives or in our life together as a congregation.

We can have this feeling as we look at our national life or the world in its entirety.

My sense is that right now many are feeling this on all of these levels.

The church consultant, Susan Beaumont, suggests that we are in a time that is a threshold. We are at the boundary between what has been and what is becoming.

"Something has ended," Beaumont, says, "but a new thing is not yet ready to begin." During such a threshold time, "systems and processes break down because they are supposed to. We cannot discover a new beginning until something ends or dies." We can feel overwhelmed during such times because we are trying so hard "to preserve or adapt things that are meant to fail."

The pandemic grinds on. Yes, we are weary. Yes, we don't know yet what the latest variant means for us, our nation, and our world. We don't know what other variants might still develop. We look toward and end of all of this. We long for a return to normal.

And here we are again—worshipping at a distance, taking care as Covid cases surge in Johnson County. It's a little different because this is worship service is live. And we are only doing this for two Sundays before we will reassess the situation.

While it can be discouraging, this is not a step backwards. It is simply a pause as we continue to move in the direction of reopening. Or to continue my metaphor, we've just turned a corner so that we don't keep going in the wrong direction.

As we pause in these days and as we move forward in these days, we have the opportunity to think about and choose the direction in which we will go, the road on which we will travel. It won't be shown to us in the stars, it won't be revealed in scripture. The way will be made known to us as we talk together and listen carefully to one another and as we share our hope and our fears for these days and the years ahead.

And as we travel on another road, when we find we're going the wrong way, we can always turn in a new direction. The religious word for that is repentance—and it is always about choice. It means we set aside some of the past normal so that something new can emerge. We consider what might need to change as we move through the year ahead. (You know the old joke: How many Congregationalists does it take to change a lightbulb? The answer: Change? There's also another answer: 5—one to change the bulb and four to sit around and talk about how good the old lightbulb was.)

So here we are—wherever “here” is for us today. Changes keep coming our way.

Thomas Merton wrote of the church in the 12th Century, but he speaks to us in 2022:

In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and with its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith, and hope. In such an event, courage is the authentic form taken by love.

An old hymn sings of “Standing in the living present, memory and hope between.” That's where we are as 2022 begins. Let us, in these days, be open to the new things that are emerging within us and among us and between us—as difficult as those new things and the living present might be.

Yes, the very dead of winter is the worst time of the year for such uncertainty, for such a journey. But this is our time.

Stars will only get us so far. They raise more questions than answers. The Magi remind us that at its richest the Christian life is not so much a life lived as though all the answers were given, but a life lived as though all our answers are only gateways into deeper levels of answering.

So let us go into this year, into this world by another road, by many different roads upon which we will discover together the ways of Jesus Christ to be made known to us in the days ahead.