

SERMON: By Another Road

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

Having lived in Cape Girardeau for just over a year now, I'm getting to know my way around pretty well. When I first arrived, I had to use the GPS on my phone everywhere I went and nearly every time, even if I was going somewhere I'd already been once or twice. The first roads I became familiar with were the main ones, of course: Broadway, Independence, William, Kingshighway.

Then when I had time and nowhere specific to go, I explored a bit, taking roads I hadn't been on before and didn't know where it would take me. Perryville Road, Lexington, Sprigg Street, Mt. Auburn, Bloomfield. Sometimes I got turned around and had to pull over and look at my phone to get back home again.

Now I'm to the point where I'm learning some alternate ways and back roads to get where I'm going. You know, to avoid the high traffic areas – if there is such a thing in Cape!

Years ago a friend of mine told me that he tried to make a habit of taking different roads for a change of scenery, to keep himself alert, to avoid fading into

that dangerous area of autopilot, when you're so familiar with the road, you can do it subconsciously and not even remember how you arrived at your destination.

I think going BY ANOTHER ROAD is a good idea for all those reasons and for the opportunity to explore and learn new things.

In the familiar story from Matthew, we know that when the wise men came from the east they were following a star. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked for directions. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" Somehow they knew he was special, that he was a king to be worshipped.

But another king – Herod – heard about their search for this new king, and Matthew reports that Herod was *frightened*. More accurately, I think Herod felt threatened. If this child really was the Messiah that had been foretold by prophets throughout the decades, he would be powerful enough to overthrow Herod and many others holding high offices. Herod's position was threatened. His authority was threatened. His power and popularity were threatened.

The little Lord Jesus who sleeps peacefully, never cries, and cares tenderly for all the dear children is a threat to those in power. But Herod figures he has

some time to turn things around since this new king is still a baby. He sends the wise men to Bethlehem to find the child. And he directs them, “When you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

There were a number of things about these men from the east that made them wise. Mostly, though, I believe it was the sacrifices they made. They were willing to go wherever they had to go and travel for as long as it took to find the one for whom the star shone. Perhaps it was their curiosity as astrologers that kept them following that star. Perhaps it was wanderlust that kept them traveling further from home. Most likely, it was the call of God that propelled them forward to find something extra special, something they believed would fill an emptiness in their souls.

When they finally arrived in Bethlehem – not just twelve days mind you, but more like two years after Jesus was born – they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. In the presence of this child, these wealthy, scholarly, respected men knew they were not worthy to be in the presence of such greatness and glory. On their knees, they worshipped him.

They opened their treasure chests. Even the most expensive gift felt like too little, like it didn't come close to demonstrating what they felt in their hearts. As a child, Jesus could give them nothing. He didn't even know who they were. But somehow they knew that they owed him everything.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country **BY ANOTHER ROAD.**

You know how it feels after being away from home. Whether you've been on the most fantastic trip of your life; whether you've been visiting precious family members that you rarely see; whether you've been stuck in an airport or sick in the hospital; even if it's just been a very long day at work – we all want to go straight home. Take the fastest route. No unnecessary stops. Definitely no detours or going the back way. Just get home as quickly as possible.

It took years for the wise men to finally reach Bethlehem. Years. Still, they went home **BY ANOTHER ROAD.**

Why? Well, they were warned in a dream. But unless we read the remainder of chapter two, which the lectionary never includes for us, we can only

assume what Herod had in mind for the child once the wise men reported where they found him.

In the remaining verses, Matthew tells that Herod had planned to destroy the child. And when he found out that the wise men had tricked him, “he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under.” One way or another, Herod was going to secure his position on the throne, no matter who got in his way. He had no regard for anyone but himself, no respect for human life; even the lives of innocent children meant nothing to him.

Fortunately, the wise men were not afraid of Herod. Though they had already sacrificed much to honor Jesus, the sacrifice of going home BY ANOTHER ROAD was more important than all the rest combined. They changed their way home. They changed their plans. They changed direction. They changed their *ways*. They risked going off the map. They took a new and unfamiliar path. These whom we call wise changed their lives for the sake of Jesus and all who would call him Savior.

As we install new ruling elders today, we are aware that we face a changing landscape in the church. Not just this church, but mainline churches and other religious institutions around the country. We don't know what's ahead of us; we don't even know what tools we'll need to navigate the new territory of the future. We are being called to go **BY ANOTHER ROAD**, to resist the temptation to stay safe and stay the same. We are being called to risk, to change, to experiment, to try and fail and try again. We are being called to sacrifice the easy and familiar path for one that may include mountains where we expect rivers. We may even be called to forge a new path altogether.

I pray that we will see the challenges before us as opportunities, that as a family of faith we will be of one mind, bound together by a common purpose. I pray that we will be filled with the wisdom and courage of the wise men. I pray that we will follow a path of light, that we will search diligently with open minds and hearts for the gifts of God. I pray that we will place a priority on worship and prayer and give generously from our treasure chests. May we begin this New Year ready and willing and overwhelmed with joy to go **BY ANOTHER ROAD**.

To the glory of God!

AMEN.