

Sermon 1-5-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Taking Another Road - January 5, 2020

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

In 1988, I stood on the steps of the only church I knew. A growing sense of dream-like disquiet rubbed the official teachings of my denomination against the loving community that held me tight. That night, two members of my youth group lingered after Bible Study waiting to ask a question, “Will Jewish people go to heaven, or must they convert to Christ?” The question came from their love for a Jewish friend, not some speculative theology. What road would I take? What kind of God.... Did the teens know of the denomination’s plans to evangelize Jewish people at it’s national gathering? I lacked the tools to share my own doubts, for I understood my role as “one who had studied to show thyself approved, a worker, who could accurately divide (and dish out) the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2:15) As we lingered on the steps, another road appeared. That road honored what we called “the priesthood of all believers.” I shared from Romans about God’s mercy, the law of Moses, and Christ. I encouraged the teens to read the passages and for us to then chat. This was my best at age 22. Within two weeks, I began a dialogue with leadership about resigning as youth director. I did not not know where I was going but knew I needed to make a new path or at least deeply examine the one I was on. Weaned on fear, I worried I might lose my faith and land in hell. So far, I have found deeper faith. Inside the UMC I discovered a theology rooted in the love of God that honors my thinking, calls me to justice, and believes that God speaks through traditions and my experiences. God often helps us see new roads in conversation, counseling, contemplation, reading, or even family dramas, I confess as we begin 2020, I am unsure what 2020 holds for our beloved UMC, but I am ready to travel the pathway God will show us.

In Frozen 2, Anna sings:

A tiny voice whispers in my mind: You are lost, hope is gone But you must go on.
And do the next right thing. Just do the next right thing. Take a step, step again.
It is all that I can do... to do the next right thing.
I won't look too far ahead. It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath, this next step. This next choice is one that I can
make
So I'll walk through this night. Stumbling blindly toward the light
And do the next right thing. And, with it done, what comes then?
When it's clear that everything will never be the same again.
Then I'll make the choice to hear that voice... And do the next right thing.

A new year reminds us of the possibilities of new roads. We, mainline churches, begin the new year with a holy day: Epiphany. Epiphany means “an appearance of God’s divine presence.” On Epiphany we remember the Magi. These wise ones came from the east, outside of the known traditions to seek and find Christ. The mysterious pull of a new heavenly star leads them. They allow dreams to alter their plans “having been warned in a dream, go home by another road.” Maybe all epiphanies lead us to make new roads. Having been warned by a dream, seeing mission in a burning bush,

blinded by the Damascus Road light, experiencing vision, finding your hard heart strangely warmed, or witnessing Rosa Parks refusing to move to the back of the bus, we make new roads. Take another road, go preach liberation in Egypt, leave behind the legalism that kills, dive into God's love, accept God's deep acceptance, and stand up for justice. The Magi, Moses, the Apostle Paul, Julian of Norwich, John Wesley, and Martin Luther King all found themselves standing at crossroads. Maybe, whenever God appears we find new roads. Behold, I AM making all things new! (2 Corinthians 5:17) In 2020, will we take or make new roads? Will we resist evil, overcome oppression, stop excluding, ponder love, organize new spiritual movements, and stand up against racial inequality? Will we take the next right step?

The Magi came from the east, perhaps Persia, China or Mongolia. They came from outside the normative Jewish margins. Does God always lead from the margins? As the caravan of eastern royals, camels, cooks, colonels, war-horses, body-guards, and assistant under secretaries rolled into Jerusalem, they surely did their diplomatic homework. The eastern envoy came with prestige, power, and privilege. They get an audience with the King and diplomatic immunity to travel freely inside Herod's kingdom. Surely the Magi already knew King Herod was self-obsessed, cunning, and vengeful. The Magi could see Herod's lavish capital improvements to the Jerusalem temple, making it one of the wonders of the world.

When the Eastern royalty arrived asking, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" King Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod ruled with fear. Herod stood in contrast to the leader the people prayed inside the gilded temple, "God, give your judgments to the king. Give your righteousness to the king; let them bring justice for the poor, peace, care for the children of those in need, crush oppression, feed people, help the poor, show compassion to the weak, deliver the needy from oppression, end violence, and count the poor as precious! Lord, let such a ruler enjoy a long life... Bless them... Let every nation be blessed through such leaders and everyone call them happy." (Psalm 72) Jesus' humble birth is a parable calling out all self-serving kings. Fear is never of God, for God is love. (1 John 3-4)

"Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" Did the Magi consider returning home when there was no child toddling about the royal nursery? Did they feel embarrassed at following a star? Was this a waste of time and treasure? Or could it be that they already knew there was no child in the royal nursery before meeting with Herod? Was asking "where is the one born to rule this kingdom... we have seen a Holy star rising" a gentle rebuke to Herod, warning Herod that divine seeds will always arise resisting evil, injustice and oppression?

"Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" Herod called together all the chief priests and scribes. Most priests served two weeks each year in the temple, returning home as did Zacheriah to regular jobs like fishing, farming, or carpentry once their time of service ended. The words "chief priests" describes an elite group of people, think of our council of bishops. This group worked closely with King Herod. At least once, a Roman vassal king directly appointed the high priest. This coziness between crown and church deeply troubled the pharisees and other Jewish movements like those of John the Baptist. In these days of rising antisemitism, let us remember that Jesus and all the first disciples were Jewish as were Jesus' enemies. Paul will carry Christ down another road, as the apostle of full inclusion!

Herod secretly called for the Magi, not giving a press conference or public meeting. He learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent the Magi to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." Herod is a liar and a manipulator, he has no plans to worship a rival king. Reading between the

lines, I imagine, the Magi sensed the fear buzzing around Herod and sized him up quickly. I want to say, "Trust your spiritual gut." If you are praying and serving, seeking and thinking, inside a community and reflecting in worship, trust your spiritual gut. The spirit often stirs us with a sense of dissonance or of peace, long before we find the right theological words or road. (Romans 8; Acts 9)

Last week, Heather told us how Joseph's dreams led to three new roads within 10 verses. Surely, before the dreams Joseph was weighing the best options. I imagine Herod's jealous rages and Persian princes worshipping his toddler son kept Joseph awake! The Holy Spirit prompts us not just with heart warming intuition but with the noonday of rational thinking.

Matthew tells us, "When the Magi had heard the king." Perhaps, the Magi only listened and made no promises to Herod. No matter their level of verbal agreement, Herod's request for them to come back to Jerusalem was the law of the land. So, the Magi left the palace and set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, 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. It is a kind of crowning or consecration! Opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for home by another road. Leaving by another road was an act of ecclesiastical or political defiance. It was an act of resistance. They violated diplomatic protocol and defied Herod, throwing him into a rage. Some might demand that the Magi march back to the palace and directly challenge the evil king, giving their lives as did Jesus and John the Baptist. Perhaps, all the Magi felt they could do was to take another road. Let us not judge too quickly, but be content to take the road God places each of us on!

Maybe every encounter with God makes possible a new road. Each reading of Christ's teachings become an epiphany that stretches thinking and challenges our way of being. Just as the burning bush put Moses on a new pathway, the Damascus Road light changes Paul's heart and mind. Paul sees the light and starts down the road to an unknown, hybrid, and non-exclusionary Christianity. Paul's epiphany makes a new Christian road with Gentiles, female preachers (see Paul's list in Romans 16), Sunday worship, and pork barbecue!

In Ephesians, Paul writes to those once excluded and still considered "less-than" Christians by some: "For Christ is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside the law with its commands and regulations.... Christ came and preached peace to you who were (once) far away and peace to those who were near. For through Christ we both have access to God by one Spirit." What is the epiphany that revealed this new hopeful road? Paul writes, "God showed me God's secret plan in a revelation... Earlier generations didn't know this hidden plan that God has now revealed... through the Spirit. This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs... by sharing with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ Jesus through the gospel." Epiphanies reveal new roads.

On the edge of 2020, as Belmonsters, Methodists and even American citizens, we see an uncertain future. We long for a more inclusive church, compassionate nation, and healthier planet. Each of us, like the small Magi caravan, may lack enough individual power to change the world. God is always making a way out of no way. (MLK) Paul, in this life, did not see the fruits of the path forward he created. Paul saw himself on the margin- working harder, in prison frequently, flogged, exposed to death again and again, lashed, beaten, pelted with stones, shipwrecked a day in the open sea, constantly on the move, danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my fellow believers, danger from fake believers, often without sleep, hungry and thirsty, cold and naked... ." (2

Corinthians 11-12) I hope the margins again show us the way- the wideness of God's love, grace, and acceptance. So let us not fear taking another road; let us use the light we have already to simply take the next right step, knowing that once the love of God strangely warms our hearts and God's light opens our minds, we will see and even make a new road home. Amen.