

As Matthew and Luke tell the story of Jesus, our texts today prepare us for what's to come, the essence of what journey with Jesus is all about. Gold, frankincense and myrrh foreshadow Jesus' true self—his ruling power, healing, and suffering ahead. And a chronicle of pompous rulers on their thrones—Emperor Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, King Herod—sets up Luke's incessant tension building toward crucifixion that God's Word of Love and Life comes not through them but ordinary people in wilderness places, maybe like you and me. {Read Luke 3:1-6, 15-17, 21-22}

The magi went home by another new way—physically, geographically not back through Jerusalem. And Matthew implies a new way in heart and mind—new orientation and inspiration.

They didn't have GPS like we did driving home from family in New Jersey a week ago. Onto I-78 west, climbing through hills for 48 miles, take the ramp onto 33 north winding another 28 miles, then merge onto I-80 west for a (mostly) straight 588 miles of many hills and valleys leveling to flat plains of Ohio, Indiana, before turning onto 131. If we strayed off the appointed route for a rest, Suzanne's GPS voice of choice directed us firmly: in 500 feet turn around, go back, take the ramp and stay where we're supposed to be! The magi had no GPS, for worse or better. No detailed directions, calculated (and recalculated) pinpointed by satellites above with an arrow on a blue line to ensure they're doing okay. They set off into desert wilderness, looking again to stars and sunrise. They trusted a wise compass in

faithful hearts to orient through uncertainty and guide a wise path amid all dangers or beauties encountered along the way.

Friends, we need that heart-compass for our pilgrim journey to Christ, leading us home by a new way. We come from afar, wherever we started in life, across time and miles and emotions. We seek a star—light of hope and goodness to inspire every next step, especially in darkest moments. We reach beautiful, bustling places—our holy Jerusalems. Yet, often amid that apparent abundance, we also face sly, insidious threats like Herod. Seductive powers in people coopting us for selfish harmful purposes. Sometimes it's fear, shame, anxiety, not-good-enoughness learned and settled inside, arising through those eyes in the mirror. Together we've yearned to be honest and honored for who we most truly are. And we confront Herodian violence and twistedness in our world—just this week from halls of Congress and courtroom verdicts about prejudice wedded to deadly force to corporate boardrooms, connections with family or neighbors, and refugees we've welcomed from afar. Go search diligently, Herod hisses, (as if he has the power). Sure, the magi will—they've come this far. It's not a question of if they do, rather why. Motive. Belief. They read a compass of faith and find the Christ-child. They follow the star. They stop and enter. They kneel and offer treasure. And warned in a dream—that's a way to say they got a sense of Grace and Love—they got a clue enough to go home not back to Herod, rather by another new way.

You see, throughout Matthew's gospel, people who meet Jesus go a new way. That's what he wants for us. As we accept who we most truly are. As we smooth rough patches in our relationships with family, or friends and colleagues, or siblings in Christ. As we straighten out consequences of choices made or faced ahead. As we stride purposefully into the wilderness—beyond literally God-forsaken deserts like those made worse by climate change, situations amid apparently bustling society where life wilts in aridness of poverty, abuse, fear—so many people who've not

flourished in an environment of love. That's the holy way Matthew urges us to seek until all people see the salvation of God—the fullness of Divine Peace.

That's home—which could be anywhere really. Whatever the roof over our head. And the sidewalk right outside our church doors where neighbors and friends among us, some who have no roof, get nourished in body and hungering hearts. Home is wherever we're accepted, affirmed, and loved into who we're created to be in God's grace, by offering that love to others. Friends, whenever we settle into these pews, step outside our doors, or walk the Camino in Spain as on our bulletin cover, we're headed home. You see, here's the simple reality about Jesus' pilgrim journey—from his baptism on, he had no house of his own. Despite all the bumper sticker sort of faith, I don't believe a divine navigation program plotted every twist and turn of Jesus' life before hand, and then touched go. When Jesus stood in the Jordan River, fully human, I believe he faced as much uncertainty as the magi who kneeled in the dirty barn next to cows and donkeys and chickens, before his feeding trough for a cradle. And yet, he always took another step toward the promise of what it means to be home.

Every valley filled. Every mountain made low. Crooked ways straight and rough places smooth. Isaiah wrote to people in captive exile longing to come home. Luke says that's what people experience in Jesus. For some people the Bible is our carefully coded navigation system. Plug in where we are and want to go, a circle spins and voila the divine blue line appears. No thinking needed. Like the Wizard of Oz just follow the yellow brick road. If only it was so easy! As we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives, friends, we don't get a precalculated GPS or Disney racetrack car on a metal rail. At times I've wanted that. In college thinking I could make a five or ten year plan, and everything go accordingly. Maybe like I try to plan pilgrim journeys. It's nice to have comfort and assurance of everything totally under control. No surprises. No temptation making us stray. No unforeseen complications.

No COVID. Amen?! But that's not real, is it. Flights get cancelled and re-route a half-day longer us through another country. Ferry workers go on strike when we're two islands from the mainland. Our hotel turns out to be five miles of hurting feet further down from what we're told. Another virulent variant takes over. [We get a new version of the Doxology and plenty of time to share the peace!]

Maybe we've made New Year's Resolutions. Maybe we've planned for retirement or to get an apartment. As we prepare the way of our Lord of Love in our story of life, friends, we get something better than easy certainty. We receive a gift, a promise more true, a compass to guide us. We share the reciprocal gift of Holy Presence—Christ revealed among us. You see, as much as their treasure chests, after their long journey the magi kneel at the manger to offer themselves, their humble, devoted presence. As Luke tells of Jesus' baptism, he emphasizes human connection. No special ritual, not even John doing it. Among ordinary people filled with expectation, yearning in their hearts ... Jesus follows right along with the rest. God with us. Then he prays, fully present to the Holy. Maybe kneeling in desert sand. Maybe standing in the Jordan River flow swirling his legs, swathing his torso, arms out, finger tips touching the surface. What prayer posture works for us? Right then, as Jesus makes himself humbly present and fully open to Holy Love, the Spirit takes bodily form and he receives the blessed Divine Affirmation: "You are beloved, my son. I adore you. I'm proud of you." So, his holy pilgrim journey begins.

In weeks ahead, friends, we begin again to follow Jesus. We'll explore what's needed on this pilgrim journey of living faith with him. Today before we set out, better than GPS navigation, get your compass. Trust that here's how it works to arrow a new way home with God. The pin, the pole, the center balance on which we twist and turn is the promise we receive like Jesus in baptism. Not that life will be easy bliss, rather whatever we face we will not be alone. Our promise is that God

claims you and me as beloved children, created very good in the divine image. We are cherished in Holy Love for who we are and can grow to be in the symbiotic sacred presence we share. This Holy Love will never leave, as long as we have open hearts to give and receive it. Our little arrow may wobble and spin, but that center pin, that balancing pole will always keep us pointing a way ahead.

And as we face our Herods sure to come, here are orienting points to guide our a new way home. True north is trusting that promise. Coming like magi to kneel before Christ, like Jesus praying at his baptism. Pointing true north we humbly devote our hearts, commit all we are and can be to his way of compassion, his truth of love, his life of service beyond self. For three other points on the compass we turn to Susan Beaumont and her book called *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going*. As we take each next step, she says there are three spiritual shifts that nurture our Holy Presence with one another and with God. You tell me what's east, west, and south!

- 1) From knowing to unknowing—we examine assumptions, observe judgments, drop preconceived certainties. Unknowing isn't ignorance or abandoning intelligence. We may offer insights, ever open to continued learning, entering mystery with curiosity, awe, wonder, joy. It's a move that nurtures confidence to release ego.
- 2) From advocating to attending—even our best ideas don't always work. Rising above fearful need to control, or at least comfort with familiar positions or desired outcomes, we simply pause to pay attention. To see. To listen. To be fully awake to what is, not just recall what was. With courage to face failure and limited capacities we find energy and fresh possibilities.
- 3) From striving to surrender—we accept what is real. It's not giving in or giving up, being passive. We let go of ourselves at the center of any equation—need to prove or be right—and give ourselves to something bigger and better

coming alive among us. Flowing from humility and bravery, ultimately it's the way we get empowered with holy wisdom and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

As we prepare to go our way, the way of our Lord and Savior, dear friends, I've seen this compass point us in recent weeks. Call them Epiphanies. I'm pleased to share we have two interviews this afternoon for organist and Director of Music. A potential way forward that arose precisely out of openness to the human connections we share, in a spirit of simply exploring what's possible beyond what currently is. However, these interviews and maybe others go, in the end, I trust we'll find magi with special gifts kneeling in heart to offer before Christ.

First, we journey like the magi and all those people at the Jordan River, who just might have travelled through the same hills and valleys centuries apart. You see, long before GPS I expect they found their way through others they met offering nourishment with a shared meal and stories, insights, landmarks to guide our way, even better travel companions who've gone this way before. In that spirit, come to this table. I wonder how far it feels we've come, and how far we may still have to go ... on our way home. You know, years ago I was chatting with David LaMotte, I think—he's a singer / song-writer one of our Briner Lecturers. David told the story of a friend who liked to simply go and get intentionally lost to see if he could find his way home and discover new places on the way. I'm not sure I recommend that practice for all of us. I appreciate GPS navigation—to know how long 'til I get home and traffic updates. Still, regardless of when we actually arrive home and what we encounter on the way, often when I get some basic idea of where I'm going, I like to shut off the incessant voice of choice to be more fully present wherever I am on the way at present, knowing I'm always in the presence of Jesus, God-with-us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 37-46.