

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
January 6, 2019
Epiphany
Title: A Different Road
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Each weekday morning a prayer arrives in my email. It's from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, a gifted pastor in our conference. On Friday, the 11th day of Christmas he quoted the 14th verse of the first chapter of John's gospel, "The Word became flesh and lived among us."

Then he wrote this prayer: "On the eleventh day of Christmas I feel the stretch. Presents unwrapped, put away, family gone, New Year's past, resolutions already broken ... and here we are still counting days.

"That one bright night, angels and candles and all, was not a singular event, but a lasting truth. God, you are not just passing through. You are here for the long haul: the chemo regime, the enduring grief, the extra year of school, the parenting that never ends, the long work of aging.

"Give me courage. Give me perseverance, to last, to go the distance on the long road to wisdom, to healing, to justice, to joy. Help me trust you are here, all the way."ⁱ

These are words that I hope to keep close to me in this new year; words that remind me that no matter what we face, God is always with us, all the way.

Today we think about some people who believed that God was with them, leading them on a journey. The Magi or wise men from the East, astrologers, students of astronomy, priestly sages from Persia, they set out on a long journey – a research projectⁱⁱ, if you will. Through the years, tradition has numbered them as three and called them Kings – maybe

because of the number and the value of the gifts they brought. Tradition has given them names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Stories and songs have been written about them. We really know very little about them, but that doesn't change their importance and their value in our faith story.

We know that they were Gentiles, not Jews, and that they traveled a long way; "hundreds of miles over difficult terrain in a trip that no doubt took many weeks or months."ⁱⁱⁱ

Matthew tells us that they came because they were following a star. It was believed, in their day, that stars marked major political or military events. They were on a quest to find the one that they believed would be called the "King of the Jews". The Jewish people hadn't been a viable political entity for nearly 600 years but still they came searching for the baby born "King of the Jews". They lived in a world that was aching with despair, a world where most people were living with little hope for the future. They came daring to dream the impossible dream, that this journey would bring them something life changing.^{iv}

Their search may symbolize our search for God – our desire for hope, for promise, for answers, for meaning and purpose. Their search brought them close – they arrived in Jerusalem and there they sought more guidance. They asked, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

King Herod heard of their search and was afraid. Herod was called the King of the Jews, but he served at the pleasure of Rome and was not from the line of David, so as far as the Jews were concerned, he was not a legitimate king for them. Herod called his priests and scholars and they advised him that the prophecy from Micah, was that the new king would be

born in Bethlehem.

Herod was afraid and pretending that he wanted to worship the new king as well, told the wise men to come back and let him know where this baby was so that he too, could go and worship. Now, we know that worshipping Jesus was never his intention. Indeed, when the wise men failed to return to him, he became angry and, in his fear and anger, decided to have all the little Jewish boys killed, so that he could be sure to kill this potential threat to his throne.

The wise men went to Bethlehem where they found the child. These Gentiles, these men from far away, were filled with joy when they found the child, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. I mentioned last week that Matthew's gospel highlights dreams as one of the important ways that God communicates with people. Most of the dreams in Matthew's gospel come to Joseph, but this one came to the Magi, warning them not to go back to Herod, so Matthew tells us that they went back to their country by another route.

Immediately after today's Gospel reading, an angel appears to Joseph in another dream and tells him that Herod wants to kill Jesus and that he is to take Mary and the baby and flee to Egypt. This is very different than what Joseph had planned for his life. Now, he finds himself fleeing for safety to protect his young adopted son.

We often find ourselves taking different roads than we had planned. Think back for a minute to when you were a child or at any period when you were younger than you are now. Has your life taken the path you expected it to take? Did you anticipate and plan to be in the position and situation you are in today? If not, how did you get where you are today? You took different roads than you had planned or anticipated.

Sometimes the decision to take a different road is or was intentional. Sometimes it came about because of unexpected circumstances or happenings in your life or in the world around you. Sometimes, you had no choice but to take a different road, but even then, there were always a choice of roads to take even if they were not obvious at first.

When life hits us with something terrible, eventually we can decide to take the road of pity and despair, or the road of hope and promise. In our grief or shock, it is easy and normal to be focused only on the changes in our lives. For a time, that can be a very necessary and even healthy part of coping and grieving and ultimately of survival and healing. But eventually we have to decide if we are going to stay on that road, or if we are going to travel a different road that God may be showing us, one that offers more hope and promise for the future, one that we know we are not traveling alone.

Our world is very different today than it was when any of us were young. For even our youngest, the world changes daily, and sometimes hourly. Things that we take for granted today were only dreams or vague possibilities when we were younger. The Internet did not even exist when I was born. Electronic computers began to be developed when I was a child. I vividly remember the day we got our first telephone, a four-party line. I was a child when we got our first television and we couldn't even image that one day the pictures would be in color or high definition.

We are constantly traveling different roads. However, sometimes we try to hold onto the way things were, we try to stay on the same road even when that road may be crumbling around us or coming to a dead end.

One night I was on my way to a church in rural Maine when suddenly the road came to an abrupt end with nothing but woods in front of me. My

GPS insisted that the road continued ahead of me right down the hill to the road where the church was located, but it was pretty clear that I was not going to be driving my car through the thick brush and trees ahead of me. I had to go back to the last turn I had made and search for a different route to get to my destination. Sometimes it is impossible to stay on the road we have been traveling.

We are at a point in our life as a congregation where it is important for us to pay close attention to the road we are traveling and to ask if we need to be taking a different road. Along with most mainline denominations, we find ourselves in a time of decreasing attendance or frequency of worship attendance. We find ourselves facing some difficult financial challenges.

Why? I can give you a whole bunch of explanations and most likely all of them have some truth to them, but none of them capture the whole truth. A few years ago, you had discussion about whether or not you could remain full time and continue to support a full-time pastor. At that time, you decided to continue on that path. Recently we have found ourselves needing to look at that same question. However, sometimes, as we discern the way forward, we may be asking the wrong question.

Just as most of us didn't anticipate that our lives would turn out exactly as they have, and that we would find ourselves on roads we hadn't even imagined, it can be tempting to ask the questions that we think we can answer fairly easily and avoid the more complicated questions that we don't even know how to ask.

Financially, can we afford to continue to pay a full-time pastor and to continue on the path we are currently traveling? Probably the simple answer to that question is no. We are grateful for some unexpected and generous financial gifts that helped with 2018 finances, but we can't count

of them for the future. More fundraisers might help in the short term, but they keep us focused on only the financial question which may not be the first or even the right question to be asking.

More and more we find ourselves in situations where quick answers from the past don't work. When quick answers work, we call them making technical changes, changing something fairly obvious that we can point to in order to bring about a change. I'm cold, so I exchange my light sweater for a heavier jacket. Now I'm warm. Problem solved. That's a very simple example of a technical change.

However, in today's complicated world, more often what we need are adaptive changes – changes that are not so easy to point to, changes that recognize that the world in front of us is nothing like the world behind us.

In our finance, SPRC, and church council meetings we have decided to be intentional about looking at the uncharted territory ahead of us. We have made some technical decisions that we think will be helpful. For example, we applied for and received a grant from our Annual Conference that will pay about 37% of my salary for 2019. We anticipate and hope that this will allow us to take some of the energy we have been putting into thinking weekly about what we can pay and what we cannot pay and put that energy into looking to the future and asking the bigger questions.

We hope to spend time looking at the road where God is leading and calling us to follow. Some of our skills, like my GPS system, may be telling us to go one way, but that way might not be the best way – or we might discover that it is blocked. Like the Magi we may need to take a different road. We need a GPS system that is not a “global positioning system” but rather one that is a “God positioning system”.

We know that new roads can be scary, but they can also be exciting.

We also know that we do not face any new road on our own. We will try to avoid the temptation to look for quick fixes that really don't fix anything, and instead look for the new exciting roads that God is inviting us to travel. The journey will include a combination of both technical and adaptive changes.

There are several important things for us to remember. Just over 50 years ago, some of our parents and some of us, were part of a new road that brought us to this location and the faithful ministry that has taken place here for 50 years. There is much about our life together to celebrate and to carry with us on our journey.

Journeys can be exciting and any journey with God leading is one that we can trust. We are going to start with the conviction that God is leading us. We are going to stay calm and remember that throughout scripture we have the promise of God's presence with us. Our scriptures last week and this week have shown God working in many ways to bring about changes that could not have been anticipated but that were what our world needed – the gift and presence of Jesus.

We are going to stay connected with each other. There will be a small team helping to keep us on track. We have contracted with Rev. Rick McKinley, the director of congregational development for our conference, who will coach and consult with us each month at no charge. Again, this is part of our connectional system – a resource available to us from our conference. He will help us stay focused on the conversations we believe we need to have.

It can be very easy to get off track, to succumb to the daily deadlines and events and lose track of the big picture. We are hoping that the grant to help with salary will help relieve one of the distractions, and that Rick's coaching will help us keep paying attention to the big picture.

Even though there will be a small team trying to keep us on track, this is a journey for all of us. This is a journey for people who worship here every Sunday, and for people who haven't stepped inside the doors for years. This is a journey for people who have been here for 50 years, people who are relatively new and for people who have not yet come. This is a journey for our older folks, our middle-aged folks, our young adults, our youth, our children, and our yet to be born. This is a journey for all of God's people.

We are going to stay the course. Most roads have twists and turns in them. Ships traveling at sea and planes flying through the air are constantly making small course corrections to help them be sure that they arrive at their intended destination. We are going to stay the course, enjoying the twists and turns, looking for the adventure and surprise around the corner, anticipating where we can, adjusting where we need to, and keeping our eyes on God as our guiding star, as our GPS.

Just as the Magi followed a star to Bethlehem to find Jesus, we will follow God, trusting God to lead us and guide us. Throughout this year, we will have more conversations about this. We'll talk about the things that are so important and so much a part of us that they need to come with us on any journey. We'll talk about the things we no longer need and can leave behind, and also about the things we aren't sure of. We'll have conversations about what makes us here at Wesley United Methodist Church unique and gives us our identity as well as what we hold in common with all Christians.

Like all of us in our individual lives, as a church we will be on a journey; a journey that with God's guidance will help us become all that God knows that we can be. A journey that will keep us fulfilling the mission

to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. A journey that will celebrate and honor the ministry of the past 50 years and help us continue in faithful ministry for the next 50 years. Let us follow the star. Let us be open to dreams. Let us be willing to take different roads when God leads us to them. Let us be thankful that we make this journey together with God leading us every step of the way.

ⁱ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light* www.unfoldinglight.net

ⁱⁱ Kalas, J. Ellsworth. Christmas from the Back Side. In his chapter on the Magi, he uses the term “research project”.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid