

## FINDING ANOTHER WAY

### *Navigating Life's Complicated Path*

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**Text: Matthew 2:1–12**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. 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.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”[a]*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

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While I don’t know much about cartography, I do know that I love a good map. In fact, if you were to accompany me on a road trip you would likely hear me complain with gusto over the inadequacy of cell phone navigation apps, because their small, limited view doesn’t allow one to see where one is actually going, broadly speaking. I am a big picture person and I want to view the entirety of my journey, not just the next five miles. My griping over this matter would probably cause you to pull over to try and locate your 1987 road atlas buried somewhere in your trunk, and or to stop at every gas station until such a map could be secured. (And trust me, they aren’t easy to find...) But with success, I would squeal with delight and spend the rest of the expedition examining the multitude of ways we could reach our destination, suggesting a variety of detours along way. If you have any doubt about this scenario, just talk to my beloved. He has experienced this in real life—and now knows that we don’t leave the house without a new and updated Rand McNally Road Atlas within reach of the passenger seat.

Each year as we hear the Epiphany story again, with the familiar players and outcomes, I find myself most drawn to the last line... that having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, the wise ones went

back to their own country by another route. Some biblical translations use the word road instead of route and in others the line reads they went “home by another way”, a line which inspired a James Taylor song:

*Yes, they went home by another way, home by another way.  
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way.  
We can make it another way, safe home as they used to say.  
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high and go home another way.*

I am in awe of anyone who can get where they are going without a map. Imagining the terrain and distance and mode of transportation used by our ancient travelers, I have no idea how they actually found their home, by another way. Changing direction—literally or figuratively—is not easy. How many of us get frustrated when we encounter a detour on our evening commute? What about when life throws us a curve ball and our “usual way” will no longer suffice? What happens when we finally realize that doing things the way we always have will never result in the outcome we truly desire? Epiphany invites us to make manifest the light of God’s love in a world so desperate for illumination. How might the story of the magi prompt us to try a new way to journey? What kind of map do we need?

Here is what I glean as the three most significant aspects of the wise one’s plight as we each consider how to navigate our own complicated life:

**First**, they did not travel alone. As a church we often lift up the transformative power of community. That to be an agent for change in a hurting world we lean in to the strength of one another to support and uplift us in our individual and collective work. We will never know exactly how many traveled by caravan to discover love incarnate in the form of a tiny human. We’ve been taught that there were three kings, astrologers, magi, wise ones...no one really knows. There could have been more, there might have only been two. But there was more than one. As we make another way, companionship is essential. As people emerging from a life altering pandemic we are now aware that loneliness is an epidemic. Nearly 1 in 4 adults admit to feeling very lonely in these complex days. The Epiphany story sheds light on the need to venture into the unknown with others, to travel not alone but with those going in the same direction. This will take courage if we prefer solitude, or if the idea of talking to someone new or endeavoring a new opportunity in a group setting is terrifying, consider the consequence of spending days isolated and solo. Perhaps a new path for you this year is to sidle up to someone you do not know and ask if you can accompany them for a time.

**Second**, trust is a prominent part of the Epiphany story... trust in each other, trust in a higher power, trust in the significance of a star, trust in the breaking open of their hearts as they gazed upon a baby savior, trust in themselves as they all dreamt a warning not to return to Herod as planned. At a meeting this fall here at Plymouth, someone at the table boldly proclaimed how little we speak in this place about trusting in God. This statement made the rest of us pause, and then heads began to nod in agreement. There seems to be an underlying fear here—whether it is in regards to the budget, or a program, or worship attendance, or what to do next, or what the future might hold—that if we do not have an immediate answer or an instant remedy, we have failed. Where does that allow for the work of the Spirit? A tenet of faith is trust, which means not having everything worked out but rather leaning in to God who will show us the way. God invites us to be change makers and problem solvers but to leave God out of those huge endeavors is to silence the possibility of spiritual transformation. In a church I served before coming to Plymouth we struggled to present a balanced budget for the congregation’s approval. Expenses always outweighed Income, at least on paper. Sound familiar? So we made an intention to pray about it. To trust that with God, opportunities would present and things would work out. We even initiated a line item under income titled “A Wing and A Prayer”. Trust became a part of our formula. It did not abdicate us from working and watching and growing and producing. But it did lessen the fear. And you know what? ... at the end of the

year there was always enough. As individuals walking a new way, how might trusting in God's presence, God's abundant love for us, God's transforming nature help us to let go of needing to control all outcomes?

**Finally**, the wise ones took notice of an unconventional navigational tool which led them to exactly where they were meant to be. For some the stars have long been the revealers of new paths but for many of us, relying on something counter cultural braces us for discomfort. If we are ready to try a new path, perhaps we need some different tools. This is why I am happy to once again offer you a Star Word. As the wise ones discerned their journey by the celestial light in the sky, Star Words offer us a possibility for guidance along our new way. We have been celebrating with Star Words at Plymouth for five years. I have prepared hundreds of paper stars, each one containing a spiritually rooted word. Your "Star Word" can help ground you in prayer, it might lead you to insight, it becomes your spiritual companion for the year. If you are feeling a bit lost, adrift, out of focus, or in need of a new way, your star word can become your rudder, a word to lead and lift you on your journey. If you are already feeling centered and are assured of where God is beckoning you, your star word can provide an opportunity to stretch your understanding or explore new territory. I believe firmly that we do not choose the Star Word, the Word chooses us. Some folks feel initially disappointed by their word. Take two weeks and then come see me if you want a new one. Many have had a change of heart after two weeks with their word. Consider your word in prayer or meditation. What is God inviting you to through your word? How does your word show up in your life? How many ways can this word be interpreted? Consider how this meaning can evolve and change over the year. A good way to start is with the dictionary. We may think we know what the word means, but perhaps we need to expand our understanding. This new navigational tool may be exactly the centering you are looking for. Like most spiritual practices and unknown endeavors, You determine the energy you want the star word to return to you.

*[If you would like a star word, please contact me at [BethF@plymouth.org](mailto:BethF@plymouth.org).]*

As the wise ones returned to their homes by another way, they did so with new understanding. Their experience of Christ was meant to be shared. Epiphany means to make manifest, to make real. What are you called to make real in the world? Like the magi, we are beckoned to be light seekers and light distributors. When we turn from the revelation of love incarnate into new ways of knowing and being known, we bear the responsibility to share the light, magnify the light, multiply the light. The Light encountered by the magi was not meant to be contained. Epiphany is really about making the distinction between missed opportunity and revelation. The wise ones discover that transformation occurs as a result of divine lure, it also occurs through our recognition that we must change or die. There is no road atlas for this kind of destination. Finding our home by another way may be nothing we might imagine, and everything we might hope for. I pray as you discern your own direction that indeed you might know companionship, that you will practice trust, and that you will accept the prompting of a star.

Amen.