

*Finding Another Way Home*

Matthew 2.1-12

January 3, 2015, the Sunday before Epiphany

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

**Matthew 2.1-12**

**2**In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men [other translations say “astrologers”] from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to honor him.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them 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 honor him.”

<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they 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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and honored him. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

<sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they returned to their own country by another way.

**Communion Reflection: *Finding Another Way Home***

I can't believe it but it has been almost 20 years since I arrived in Seattle to make this place my home. It was a cold and snowy December. Snow and ice had pretty much paralyzed the city.

For Christmas, I managed to get down to Vancouver, WA to stay with a friend. But when it came time to make my way back, another storm blew in. They predicted that there was a break coming and so I decided to try heading north on I-5 to beat the next round of snow.

The trip went pretty well until I got to the one exit I knew would take me home. The exit was jammed with snow and ice and I hadn't been here long enough to know any of the alternative routes.

I panicked. How would I ever get home? I had no GPS. I had very little sense of direction. Coming from Chicago with its nice clean grid of streets, the layout of Seattle didn't really make any sense to me. Even if I wanted to ask for directions, there was hardly anyone around to ask.

All I knew was that, if I wanted to find my way home, I had to get there another way.

I did finally make it home that night but the trip became a life lesson for me. Sometimes in order to find your way home, you have to get there another way.

That's what those Wise Ones or Astrologers or Magi/Magicians may be teaching us in this lesson from today. Their pilgrimage – likely from a place we would now call Iran – had led them to Jerusalem where they had to get directions from the local Bible scholars in order to get the rest of the way.

I have said before that I think this is one of the biblical illustrations of the wisdom of interfaith conversation. Whatever the Wise Ones were, they were not Jewish nor were they – nor could they have been – Christians. They were faithful ones in their own tradition who were paying attention to the signs around them and it was in their conversation with the readers of the biblical prophets that both – the Wise Ones and the prophetic scholars – found the Holy One they were looking for.

As this story is told, the prophetic scholars didn't know when to look for the promise and the Wise Ones didn't know where to look. It took both of them talking to each other to find the way.

And let's be clear, this represents another way. This isn't the same old way of religious rhetoric.

I am very much persuaded by Muslim leaders, that the reason Muslim young people are being radicalized in their faith is not because the vast majority of Muslims have anything bad to say about Christianity. For a very large part, they don't. Radicalization is happening because people who claim to be Christians say such hateful things about Islam.

I was at one event where a Muslim friend of ours was talking about their efforts to mitigate the extremism coming from the edges of Muslim life. He started the presentation by playing a few video clips from a certain American news channel and it soon became clear what messages Muslim youth might be hearing about who we think they are. "The extremists don't have to do anything to make a radical," our friend said, "all they have to do is play videos of what our culture is already saying about them. It's no wonder they are afraid and angry and want to fight back."

This is no excuse for terrorism and violence. It is, however, an appeal for another way – another way of talking with and about other religious traditions; another way of paying attention to the things that are happening around us; another way to understand our own religious tradition.

It is said that the earliest members of the community of Jesus were not called "Christians." They were called "people of the way."

In our own Mission Statement we say that we are "a community of faith united in exploring what it means to follow the way of Jesus Christ."

I'd like to suggest that sometimes in following Jesus we need to be people of another way.

The great Dale Turner, long-time pastor at University Congregational Church and a great friend of our own Rod Romney, wrote that ...  
*the great need for our day is a combination of open-mindedness, which makes for progress, and a loyalty to those convictions that conserve the best contributions of the past ... Somewhere between dogma on the one hand and skepticism on the other is another way.*

I want to point out that Dale Turner is saying that "another way" is a combination of open-mindedness and "a loyalty to those convictions that conserve the best contributions of the past."

Sometimes I think we are really good at the open-minded part – sometimes, as Patrick says, we can be so open minded that our brains fall out. Sometimes I think we are a little too quick to throw the baby out with the bathwater. That’s one way.

Another way is to be open-minded but with a commitment to respect those things – those stories, those songs, those traditions -- that make us who we are. To hold on to and to celebrate the things that have come to feed our souls; the things that connect us to the best part of our history; that things that remind us of home.

And that’s not easy. Those poor old Wise Ones must have been disappointed to be warned in a dream that, if they were going home, they needed to get there another way. All the travel plans and the familiar landmarks and the helpful directions that got them to that little town of Bethlehem wouldn’t do them any good on their way home. They had to get there another way.

Again, let’s be clear. Following another way might involve some innovation and imagination and, no doubt, some confusion. But there could be no doubt where those Wise Ones were headed. There might be more than one way to get there but they knew where they were headed. They were headed home.

“Home” is a big deal around here. I know it can be a loaded term. “Home” can be the place where you store your baggage – all that destructive emotional stuff that gets shoved into closets until it comes spilling out in even more destructive ways. “Home” can be illusive – like the place at the end of the yellow-brick road that never seems to materialize out of our high expectations and our good intentions.

So, when we talk about “home” around here we are talking about another way of being together in the world.

“Home” is the place that does its best to welcome you as the gift you are. It’s the place that helps you remember your past and to imagine your future. It’s the place that helps you dream another way when your life gets stuck. It’s the place that calls out -- no matter who you are or where you’ve been – “Come home, it’s time for dinner.”

And, when you get there, the table is already laid out with that ‘comfort food’ that makes you know you are loved and it will be alright.

You may have to take another way to get there but it really is true, “there’s no place like home.” And today, if you hear that voice calling out to you, “Come home, come home, dinner is ready!” well don’t harden your hearts.

Dale Turner, *Another Way: Open-Minded Faithfulness* (High Tide Press, 2000).

## INTRO TO BAPTISM

Tracy & Steve, Jan. 3, 2015

I think people generally assume that we are “Baptists” because we baptize people.

The truth is, we are “Baptists,” because our spiritual ancestors lived and died for the freedom of conscience – for the value of soul liberty by which they meant that we have to make a choice about being responsible for our spiritual lives. No one else can make that commitment for us. No one can impose it on us. No one can take that journey away from us.

So what makes us “Baptists” is not that we baptize people. It’s that we believe baptism is about this freedom and this responsibility to decide someday – and every day really – what it means for us to follow the way of Jesus.

Tracy and Steve come to make that commitment today.

And your job is to be the water. You are the community that surrounds them like this water. You are the ones that will uphold them along their way. You are the ones who will remind them, no matter what, that they are immersed in the love of a God whose wide mercy knows no limit of height or depth or past or future or life or death.

You are like this water and the Spirit, like she did in creation, hovers over this water to help Tracy and Steve walk in newness of life – as new creations.