

Hespeler, 3 January 2021 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-12

**W**e are told that after the Magi from the East had visited the child, **“they left for their own country by another road.”** And I always thought I understood what that meant. Had they taken the same route back, that would have meant passing through Jerusalem again. And to do that was to run the risk of running into King Herod who would ask them if they had found the child that they were looking for. In other words, I’ve assumed that the warning of the dream was a warning about Herod and what he was likely to do.

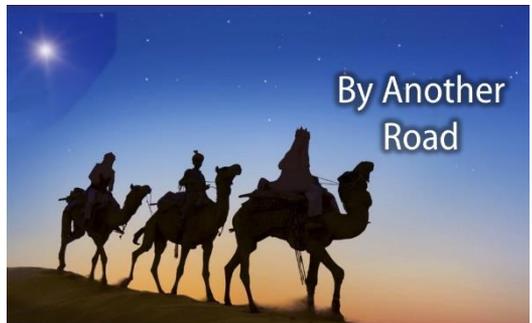
But think about that for a moment. How much sense does that really make? If you continue to read the story, you very quickly realize that Herod hardly needed to get a report back from the Magi in order to take care of what he perceived to be the problem of a newborn claimant to his throne.

Despite anything that Herod might do, God already had a plan, by means of another dream given to Joseph, to make sure that the child was safe; he didn’t need the cooperation of the Magi to save him. In fact, couldn’t you argue that the wise men actually made matters worse by failing to return and see Herod? I mean, if they had returned and said, “Oh yes, we found the boy and he’s in the house at 368 King David Boulevard,” then Herod’s strike would have been much more focused, and God could have still saved the child without the need for such generalized slaughter. I know, we probably shouldn’t speculate about such things too much, but it does at least raise the question for me of whether we might have misunderstood the warning in the wise men’s dream.

What if there was some other reason not to return to Herod? Some other reason to find a different road home? I’ve been intrigued lately by a suggestion I found in a book I read by Amy-Jill Levine that the Magi serve as a kind of comic relief in Matthew’s nativity story. They really seem to have a way of getting everything quite wrong.

When Matthew refers to the Magi, he means something very specific. Magi were not just magicians, as the word later came to mean, nor were they merely astrologers. They were scholars and priests of the religion of ancient Persia known as Zoroastrianism. In fact, to this very day Zoroastrians still exist and they still call their religious leaders Magi. As important priests in Persia – leaders of the established religion of that land – the Magi knew a thing or two about how to deal with kings and other authorities. They were particularly adept at politics and at dealing with the politics of their neighbours in the Roman Empire.

Given all of that, the Magi seem to make a number of rookie mistakes in their dealings with King Herod and his court. When they show up in the city of Jerusalem and start asking



By Another  
Road

everyone they meet, **“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage,”** they really should know that this is not the kind of question that a king like Herod wanted asked. A self-important, narcissistic and tyrannical king such as Herod was famous for being, was not going to take kindly to foreign officials showing up and asking for an audience with a child who was apparently going to steal Herod’s kingdom away from him. Honestly, if God really wanted to send the wise men a dream to avert a disaster, wouldn’t it have made more sense to send the dream earlier and warn them not to visit Herod the first time?

The Magi are traveling because they are following a star. And of course, the behaviour of the star in the story really doesn’t make any sense according to our modern understanding of celestial bodies. But, apparently, this star that they are following, this celestial phenomenon, whether it be a conjunction of planets such as amazingly happened this year at Christmas, or some other heavenly body whose movements don’t really make sense, has the ability to direct them with great accuracy.

By reading the moving positions in the sky, these Magi are apparently able to limit their search to a postal code within the village of Bethlehem. But, amazingly, as they pass by the great city of Jerusalem on their way, the Magi choose to disregard the guidance of the stars that have already brought them such a great distance, and instead turn aside into the city to seek directions.

This clearly seems to be because they are making assumptions that they shouldn’t make – that a big important city is the place for a king to be born and that important people like the local royalty and scribes are the ones who can help them find what they seek. They are, in other words, trapped into the modes of thinking that they have always lived with. They are trapped into thinking that important political and religious figures like them are the only ones who have the real answers. But they are wrong, and it actually creates a huge mess.

The other funny things about the Magi are the gifts they bring. Surely you’ve noticed that they aren’t very practical. As many have noted – as you can’t help but notice every time you hear the Christmas song, *“Do you hear what I hear,”* – the appropriate thing to do when you hear that, is not necessarily to “bring him silver and gold.” A blanket or warm clothes at least seems a little bit more obvious!

They seem to have made the same mistake that gift givers have made down through the ages. They have prepared their gifts based on their ideas of who the person is rather than on the real person him or herself. And I suspect that they were more than a little taken aback when they stepped into that house in Bethlehem and saw an ordinary family – the father nothing more than a carpenter – and I’ll bet that their gifts that seemed so well suited, when they thought they were heading for a royal court, felt a little bit out of place in that ordinary house.

So, in other words, the Magi's route towards Bethlehem was hardly perfect. They messed up by turning aside to Jerusalem, they messed up by speaking to Herod and they did not choose their gifts wisely. Most of all, they made these mistakes because they assumed the wrong things about the child that they were going to see and who he really was.

But maybe, after they had seen the child, they suddenly realized how wrong their assumptions had been. Maybe after they had seen the child, they could never think of royalty in the same way that they had before. Maybe they could no longer think of politics in the same way. Maybe they even looked at the precious gifts that they had brought and that had seemed so impressive and even awe inspiring when they set out and suddenly they seemed cheap and gaudy in comparison to the gift of the child that they had seen. That short time that they had spent in the house with the mother and her child might well have forced them to look at many things in very different ways.

So what if the warning that came to them in a dream was a little bit different from what we have imagined? What if the warning was, "You guys didn't act so wisely on your way here, so why don't you become truly wise men and find a different way back." What if the different route back was meant to be the beginning of a whole different way of living their lives from now on?

Because here's the thing. Matthew didn't just write this story about people who lived a long, long time ago and what they did. That would be a history and Matthew didn't write a history; he wrote a gospel. This story is supposed to be as much about you, the reader and the listener, as it was about them. And I believe that Matthew is issuing a challenge to you today, right now at the beginning of 2021.

He has just told you the story about how Jesus came into the world. He has told you that Jesus came as the heir of King David and that there was a cloud of scandal when he was conceived. He has told you that it was revealed to Joseph that the child would be Emmanuel which means that God is with us like God has never been with us before.

He has invited you to contemplate this child and ask yourself what it really means that he has come into the world. And he really only asks one thing of you as a result of your contemplations. He is not asking you to believe this thing or that thing about the nature and conception of the child. That is meant to be a mystery far beyond your understanding. He is not asking you to understand and interpret all the prophecies that he says that Jesus' birth fulfilled. He is giving you the opportunity to experience Emmanuel – God with us.

Most of all, he is expecting that, if you really hear this story, you will return by another road. You will find that just can't go back to your old way of life, your old attitudes and your old ways of doing things. And, since so many of the mistakes that the Magi made seem connected to their assumptions – their assumption that the place to look for kings was in palaces, their assumption about who to trust and their assumption about giving – he wants you to

understand that there is no going back to the easy assumptions that you once made. The Christmas story is supposed to make you rethink all such things.

Let's think maybe especially about the assumptions we make around giving. You know, there was a time not all that long ago when we thought in very patronizing ways about giving. We would, for example, send all kinds of used goods or cheaply manufactured goods to people struggling in third world countries.

This was thought to be a good thing to do. If people were hungry, for example, didn't it make sense to send them food? Or, when they had problems (which always seemed to be the case), we would send them our experts or even sometimes our completely untrained volunteers to fix things for them – to dig them wells or set up their systems for them. We'd tell them how it all needed to be done and then just go home and assume that everything had been fixed.

The sad truth is that giving like that may have been well intended, but it has often failed. Our cheap or used donated goods undercut local manufacturers and put them out of business, meaning that unemployment only went up. Our gifts of food undermined the nutritional solutions that had worked in their societies for generations. Our solutions to their problems, which might have worked well in our society often didn't fit in their world because of cultural differences or ways of doing things that work for them but don't work for us. Sometimes, our generous giving actually made things worse.

So we've had to learn that it is better to partner with communities in need – to listen to them, to allow them to manufacture or find their own solutions to their problems. In many cases, they even have things that they can teach us that will enable us to find the solutions to our problems. We have had to give up the assumption that we too easily made that we had the only knowledge, wisdom or solutions that mattered or that could work. In our global mission and generosity, we have begun to take a different road home and it is a great blessing.

That is just one example of how we have had to learn to question our assumptions. We are often like the Magi. We intend to do what is right, to offer homage to God's chosen one, to give generously, to proclaim the glorious truth of Emmanuel and the light of the star, but despite our best intentions, we don't always get it right, so let's also copy the Magi by being willing to listen to the dream that forces us to challenge our assumptions and maybe take a different road home.