

“LEAVING BY ANOTHER ROAD”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

December 31, 2006

The Rev. Ryan Lambert

Copyright © 2006

Our neighborhood had several houses that went “all out” with Christmas lights this year; and every time we returned home, Grace asked that we enter our street from the northern end so we could see one particular house that became her favorite throughout the season. A few days ago as we returned from the store, just as it was getting dark, Grace again asked if we could go by the lights; but as we passed by the house not only were there no lights to be found, there was also what had been, only a few hours earlier, a Christmas tree, lying on its side near the curb. It was December 28th and the decorations had come down. Christmas was officially over, at least if you took your cues from that family.

Perhaps your tree and your decorations are still up at your house, perhaps not. Taking down the tree always seems like a lot of work so soon after Christmas, and I must admit that sometimes it takes on ominous tones for me. In fact, at our house on at least one occasion we have still been looking at a dried out Christmas tree on January 15th, partly because we haven’t had the time and energy to take it down, and partly because I haven’t been willing to let go of Christmas just yet. I hate to let go of the decorations of Christmas and so, perhaps, I hold on too long.

Whatever the status of your decorations, the calendar offers inescapable evidence that we are moving beyond the first few days after Christmas. For Christians, 12 days after Christmas, on January 6, we celebrate Epiphany, the date of the kings arrival to meet and pay homage to the baby Jesus. Epiphany isn’t merely a way to elongate our celebration of Christmas but is, instead, a way of marking the extraordinary effects of the incarnation of the baby Jesus. As we celebrate the baby born in the manger, the arrival of the kings announces that this is no ordinary baby, that the childhood of Jesus will not be marked by the adorable qualities of an infant. This infant has instead come to bring light, to thrill the heart, to change the world. There is little room for “cute and cuddly” when the prophets have foretold your birth, when gold and frankincense rather than a cute blue “onesies” have long been your proclaimed gifts, when the world awaits your birth.

Epiphany is the day when the truth of the birth of Jesus becomes evident to the world. This happens through the arrival of the kings and their invitation into this story from King Herod. I am fascinated by the kings and the fact that they are the ones who enter the story and announce exactly who Jesus is. The epiphany story is filled with political and social intrigue, and much responsibility rests upon the kings for bringing the implications of Christ’s birth into view.

In order to understand Epiphany we must first look at the political intrigue associated with Matthew’s account of the arrival of the kings. Verse 2:2 tells us that the wise men (the kings) came 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 pay him homage.” Our passage also notes that Herod was afraid because of this news. But we must ask “What exactly was striking fear in the heart of Herod?”

One thing we should understand is that the star that the wise men, or kings, tell about was probably a comet. In that era, comets in the western sky were often thought to announce political upheaval and danger; thus, Herod would have been put on alert by the arrival of those who followed such a star.

Second, imbedded in our passage is a debate about what exactly the kings were asking. Many scholars suggest that the Greek word *Ioudaios*, translated here as “Jews,” should in fact read, “Judeans,” which would leave the kings; question as this: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Judeans?” Then this becomes a question loaded with political intrigue, because suddenly this child is king of a land rather than just a religion; and for King Herod this would have huge implications. And, naturally, he would want to find out exactly who this child was.

Another signal to the political ramifications of the arrival of the Kings is in verse 7 of our text. “Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.” Life in Mediterranean societies had very little in the way of privacy. Everything honorable was expected to be done in public because only the dishonorable have something to hide. Open doors were the norm, and it was typical to be overt in the public way of doing one’s business in order to make it clear that one was honest. Herod, however, does his bidding to the Magi shrouded in secrecy. This, lest someone believe that he desires to pay homage, is a signal of the dishonorable intent of his actions.

The kings, then, set about on their journey to find the child—both out of their own curiosity brought about by seeing the comet, as well as due to Herod’s instructions. They followed the star (or probably a comet), and stopped when they found the place where Jesus and Mary were residing. Then they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense—as the prophets foretold—and myrrh, also. Three gifts, from which we deduce that there were three kings.

And the story of the kings ends with them being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they leave by another road. You were invited today to bring Kings from your crèche sets and place them here, in our manger scene. I asked you to do so for a couple of reasons. First, I am intrigued by the role of the kings in announcing the importance of Jesus, and I like the idea of continuing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, recognizing the many ways we represent the ones who came to pay homage to the Christ child. They are represented in various colors, various positions, bringing different sized gifts for the holy child. Epiphany and the arrival of the kings remind us that there were some who played a vital role in the birth narrative of Jesus who weren’t even there for his birth. For a community such as ours, gathered some 2000 years after his birth, the late arrival of the kings is an announcement that we didn’t miss out on the story. This is where we insert our collective sigh of relief, “Whew, we do have a point of entrance into the story, we weren’t born too late.”

More importantly, though, I invited you to bring your kings because I think they are the people in this story around whom we are most likely to pattern our lives. The kings looked into the air and recognized that something was calling them. They were confronted with a great moral question by King Herod, yet they chose to finish their journey to find Jesus, and then turn their backs on Herod’s request. The kings, the ones who came from afar and recognized what Jesus was to become, deliberately chose not to reveal his location; they chose another road to travel.

This I think is our call imbedded in the story of the Kings. In this day and age, I believe we are the kings. We are the ones who have heard the story and have a journey that is spreading out before us if we are to meet the Christ child and understand the importance of his birth. For all of our decorations, for all of our carols, for all of our holiday spirit, it is not enough to meet the Christ child in the manger on Christmas Eve, on Christmas morning, for a few days after, and then let him lie there alone, forgotten until next year. Now that we have waited our way through Advent, now that it is time—or nearing time—to take down the decorations, it is also time to look for the other roads we will

travel in the aftermath of Christmas. How does the coming of the Christ-child call us to change the route we are traveling?

Today is New Year's Eve, and although I am not generally big on New Year's resolutions, I wonder if Epiphany resolutions might not suffice? Perhaps, just as the kings decided to change their route upon seeing the Holy child we, too, should use our time in "de-decking the Halls" to decide upon new routes we would like to take. We all have different circumstances and are at different places in our faith journey, but perhaps as we put away our manger scenes we might also bring our bibles into a more prominent place so that we will read a little more about how Jesus journeyed from being that little baby to savior. Maybe some will covenant to work at reconciling a broken relationship. Perhaps we will decide to follow a different path in our jobs, in how we parent, in how we interact with one another. Perhaps we will decide to exercise more to make the physical body of Christ healthier and thus allow our spiritual selves to be healthier too. Maybe you want to read more, play more, give more of yourself to the community, give more to this community; whatever it is that you choose, I invite you to recognize that the kings offer a chance to leave this Christmas season by another road. I invite you to see the arrival of the kings and, thus, the ending of the Christmas season not as reason to mourn but as a reason to dream about what is possible.

The Christ child is lying in the manger, but soon he will be in the temple teaching, soon he will call his first disciples, soon he will be denied, and all too soon we will again be witnesses to the holy week drama. For two millennia those who have delighted in the birth and the subsequent life of Jesus have been those who followed another road. It is our turn to follow. Where is that road calling you now? Thanks be to God. Amen.