

“By Another Road”

A Sermon for Epiphany Sunday
and
the First Worship Service of United Congregational Church in Milton, MA

Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

*“ . . . star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.”*

Beloved people of God,

- followers of Jesus,
- bold believers, daring doubters, loving leaders,
stargazers, wonder-filled worshippers,
- all of us today—
 - in person and online—
 - who are now, in this moment,
part of United Congregational Church—
- *Happy Epiphany!*

Now I am absolutely certain this is the greeting each
of us plans to share with everyone we meet
tomorrow, January 6,
—ok, maybe not.

But we could. It might be interesting to try it—*or not.*

<grin>

Seriously though, January 6, the twelfth day *after* Christmas, is, every year, a day the Christian church—

- in the Western part of the Christian tradition that is—
- celebrates Epiphany and begins the church or liturgical season of Epiphany.

The feast of the Epiphany started in the Eastern church in honor of the baptism of Jesus. It was then introduced into the West in the fourth century, nearly 400 years after the death of Jesus, when it came to be associated with the visit of the magi or wise men to Bethlehem.

Speaking of the magi, I now offer this spoiler alert:

- we have no idea if there were really *three* “kings” who visited the holy child of Bethlehem
- the gospel of Matthew,
 - the only one of our gospels that gives us this story,
 - the gospel of Matthew gives no specific number of magi OR
- “kings”
 - as we often sing in “*We Three Kings*,”
 - which is the preferred English—
 - most certainly in the *KING James Version* translation of “magi,” or “wise men,”
 - these wise ones it seems were “astrologers,”
 - those who studied the stars

- and they may have even been Zoroastrians (adherents of another ancient monotheistic religion),
- magi is a word translated from the Greek *magos*, [mahgos]
 - a word used for the Persian learn-ed and priestly class portrayed in the Bible
 - said by ancient historians to have been originally the name of a Median [*Meedian*] / Iranian tribe)
- biblical scholars suggest the wise ones or magi in this gospel story represent the rest of the known world of that day

These magi “from the East” were probably from an area which is now part of Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Yemen

- *Let’s just pause on that for a moment*
- These magi “from the East” were most likely from an area which is now part of Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia or Yemen
- The Eastern part of our Christian tradition commonly speaks of 12 magi; while the Western part speaks of 3, most likely because Matthew mentions three gifts

I have always loved Epiphany for a number of reasons:

- I think it’s a really good excuse for extending our celebration of Christmas

- Epiphany is the day *AFTER* the 12th day of Christmas!
- One more day to celebrate the light and stars that bring joy and illumine our darkness
- I also love how the heart of the story of the magi is that:
 - *We're in*—Gentiles, that is, non-Jews; and that means:
 - EVERYBODY is IN
 - That's what the story of the magi is about
 - God-with-us, Emmanuel, is a gift for
 - “the rest of the known world,” in other words:
 - *EVERYONE*
- I also love Epiphany because of the way Matthew ends this story:

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they [the magi] left for their own country by another road.

¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Had I been one of those magi, a warning like that would

- have struck fear in my heart and
- had me quaking in my boots.

Why?

Because I have absolutely *no* sense of direction.

- None
- I can honestly be staring at a beautiful sunset and simultaneously wonder what direction I'm facing.
- Without maps, Mapquest (and my spouse whom I lovingly call "Bethquest,") and now Siri—I am literally lost
- I happen to have an amazing moral compass, but I was simply born without a directional compass.
- For me to be warned of the need to take another road would *NOT* make me a happy camper.

*And yet, and yet, is it not true that you and I
are now traveling "by another road?"*

For a variety of reasons our amazing Consolidation Team created a timeline of our coming together that had each of our predecessor congregations traveling our *Advent* roads independently one last time...

- Advent
 - The season that begins each new liturgical or church year
- *Another road*—
 - our Advent roads were
 - roads of expectation and waiting and longing
 - far different than our consumer culture's road to South Shore Mall,

Derby Street Shoppes or even the cyber roads to Amazon and everywhere else we travel online

- even different than our road to “grandmothers’ house,”
- *another* kind of *road* that invites us, calls us, into prayer and worship
- a road lit by candles of hope, peace, joy and love
- *another road*,
 - a *different* road,
 - that points us toward Bethlehem

Our respective former congregations intentionally made our separate ways to the manger—
or the manger once again made its way to us—

and now our new congregation—

our United Congregational Church—asks us:

- what *star* or stars are guiding us into this new adventure of faith?
- what *gifts* do we each come bearing?
 - each of our congregations and
 - each one of us
- what “epiphanies” await to enlighten us?
- For Epiphany—the day and the season, like Advent—
 - these liturgical Christian bookends to Christmas—

- both remind us that as followers of Jesus we travel “by another road.”

After all the gift giving and caroling and feasting of Christmas, what road, what way do we decide to go home?

- Could it be that those first magi or wise ones exhibited their greatest wisdom by going home by another road?
 - Why continue to journey independently as
 - Spiritual travelers OR
 - Congregations
 - When the epiphany of another road of interdependence and coming together calls out to us?
- It appears the magi found their load lightened considerably by sharing their gifts—let me say that again—
 - *the magi found their load lightened considerably by sharing their gifts*—
 - they could now heed the signs of their dreams
 - and go deeper, reach even wider, and make their way home by *another road*.

What post-Christmas, post-consolidation and Epiphany dreams are we dreaming right now?

What star or “star words” or “star gifts” might guide **US** into this new year?

The practice of sharing star words for the new year is often connected to the celebration of Epiphany, when we remember a star in the sky guiding the magi to Jesus.

During our OFFERTORY today everyone will be offered a star word to take home with you.

We invite you to place your star word where you will see it regularly and use it as a guide or touchstone to reflect on God's movement in your life.

Star Words (The Riverside Church in NYC trcnyc.org)

Beloved people of God,

- followers of Jesus,
- bold believers, daring doubters, loving leaders, stargazers, and wonder-filled worshippers,
- we, too, have chosen to travel down *another road* together as one united congregation.

And now, gifted with our "star words" or "star gifts," I cannot help but wonder what awaits us on

- this road we have chosen together *and*
- the many roads we will each travel this year

One of my Instagram friends posted a New Year meme that continues to stick with me.

- Two cartoon characters are discussing the year 2025 before us and one says to the other:
 - Why so optimistic about 2025?
 - What do you think it will bring?
 - Everything seems so messed up?
 - The other replies:
 - I think it will bring flowers.
 - Yes? How come?
 - Because *I am planting flowers.*

So, I wonder, as we begin this new adventure of faith by another road:

- Will we plant flowers?
- Will we plant hope?
- Will we plant belonging?
- Will we plant peace?
- Will we plant growth?
- Will we plant joy?
- Will we engage in acts of service and justice?
- Will we plant love?
- Will we plant light?

Please God, we pray, that it may be so.

Amen and Amen.