

***By Another Route***  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12  
Epiphany of Our Lord

On New Year's Day I joined my mom and brothers for lunch. As we sat down to partake the traditional New Year's Day meal of collards, black-eyed peas, hog jowl (well, we had pork roast) and corn bread, I asked mom, "Now tell me again why it is we do this every year?" Her reply was surprising to me. "Well, I guess it's because we have always done it, and my parents and their parents before them did it." I have heard several different variations on the reasons for the tradition, but none of them make much sense. However, even though I do not fully understand the rationale and apparently my mom does not either, we did it – and I think I have done it every year of my life.

The story of the Wisemen coming to Jerusalem as recorded by Matthew is similar. We preach on this passage every year. Much has been made of this story, even though we actually know very little. Frankly, there are far more questions about this passage than there are answers. For instance, there is no clarity about from where in the East these "wisemen" traveled. There has been a great deal of speculation, but there is nothing in the Bible or secular history that shows with certainty where these wise men made their home. We do not know who they were, though poets and theologians of early centuries assigned them the names of Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar.

We typically see three in our nativity scenes, but we do not know how many wise men there were. Three gifts are mentioned but there may have been more. Though most nativity sets include the wise men along with the shepherds, the scriptures tell us that the shepherds came to Bethlehem to see the Messiah. The Kings visited Jesus in Jerusalem. We don't know how long it took them to travel to Jerusalem and therefore we do not know how old Jesus was when they arrived in Jerusalem. They said they had seen his star in the sky, and many choose to focus on the star, when preaching about this passage. There have been great scientific and astrological analysis of this heavenly phenomenon – but we really don't understand. Then again, we don't need to understand in order to believe and to seek the Promised Messiah as the Wise Men sought him.

We may not have the information needed, or the ability to understand all these things, but each of these questions are reminders that we need not understand. We believe and because we believe, we know that it is God that called to the wise men and calls to us and it is God that equips wise men and equips us – equips those whom God calls, to do what it is that God calls us to do.

Now don't misunderstand me. It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the story. You see, the story of the Magi, seeking, finding, bringing, giving, and protecting is our story. For today's purposes, and for our own instruction, we want to focus on the people who heard, who saw, who received a message from God, followed God's direction, and acted upon God's instruction – and carried out the mission God had given them. This morning I want you to think about the wise men and women who have been called to follow God, to seek God's will and have done so – even when the answers were not apparent or easy.

In her book, *The Modern Magi: A Christmas Fable*, Carol Lynn Pearson tells the story of a 57 year-old waitress, who wanted more than anything to go to the Holy Land and see where Jesus was born. She saved her money, determined to go in search of Jesus.

The first year she saved \$2,000 – "her special money for Jesus." One day shortly before Christmas her favorite customer came in, despondent because her daughter had to drop out of college because her husband, father of her daughter, had lost his job and could not find work. The

waitress, a faithful follower of Jesus, heard a voice that said, "You can give me the gift now." And so, she wrote a note:

*Dear Marianne, This is a gift from me to you and to Jesus. I don't want you to drop out of school and neither does he. There are too many little children who need to have a good teacher like you. Please stay in school and teach the children to be good. A Friend.*

The Second year by July she had saved \$2400. She saw a picture in the local newspaper of her high school sweetheart who had broken her heart. She had not seen him since they graduated. The article said His wife needed money for a kidney transplant. Again, she heard the voice. "You can give me my gift now." And she wrote the following note:

*Dear Tom and Jennifer, I wish I had fifty thousand dollars, but this is all I have. I am going to pray that many others will send some too, and I know that you will have the amount you need. I saw your picture in the paper. You are a beautiful family. And I hope you have a very happy Christmas. A Friend.*

As the Third year began, she checked on the cost of the trip and sure enough, the cost had gone up, but she was able to save all the money needed! Overjoyed that she was finally going to take the trip of her dreams, to the Holy Land where her Savior was born, she went to the travel agency to pay for her trip in full. However, on her day off, the day she was going to go pay for the trip – fire destroyed the house of a family in her neighborhood. Again she heard the voice, "You can give me my gift now." She gave them all the money she had saved and realized she no longer felt up to making the trip to Bethlehem.

You see, Annabelle had dreamed of going to Bethlehem at Christmas to give a special gift to Jesus. She never made it to Bethlehem – what actually occurred was not what she expected. However, in the meantime she learned the true meaning of giving, of sacrifice and of faith. That is how it is with God. God uses us in ways we may never have imagined. We have seen the light that shines in darkness. We have embraced the new life of our Savior. We have experienced life with the Holy Spirit moving among us. We have been forever changed. Life is new and we cannot go back the way we came. Like the wise men, we must go by another route. The road we think we are to travel may not be the road God calls us to travel.

First Presbyterian Church here in Thomasville has traveled some familiar roads in the years since God ordained this church into being. However, like the Magi, we are called to look up – to look out – to seek the place where the star shines and the place where God is calling us to go – the place to minister in God's name. It is not going to be the well-worn path we have trod before. We must travel by another route.

As a people seeking the star; as people called by God to follow; as God's disciples seeking to return home by another way, we cannot "do it the way it has always been done." Rather, we must go another way as we seek God's call to ministry together. We are different. We are changed. A child has been born to us. And on this Epiphany Sunday God calls us to return by another road.

This is a beginning of a new year and we are going to spend a large portion of the next few months discerning how God is calling FPC to minister in God's name. In order to discern God's will, we must be open, looking up, aware of God working in and through us. We must be intentional about our prayers and listening for the voice that says, "You can give me my gift now. Follow this path." I assure you that God is with us. It is up to us to follow. Amen.