

6 Jan 2013  
Matthew 2:1-12  
Isaiah 60:1-6

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CCNS

“Another Road”

A little story about perception and misdirection:

A teacher needed some supplies from a Sunday school cupboard that was seldom used and was secured with a lock. She didn't know the combination, but the minister offered to give it a try. Father Jack placed his fingers on the lock's dial and raised his eyes heavenward for a moment. Then he confidently spun the dial and opened the lock. Seeing the look of awe on the teacher's face, he smiled and confided, "The combination is written on the ceiling."

Matthew wasn't the first to tell stories of travelers coming to Jerusalem from the East. The notion goes as far back as 580 B.C. The Jews had been in exile and when they finally returned home, they found Jerusalem in ruins. What a mess. Hope had turned to despair. Were they to be released to freedom only to find destruction?

In the midst of this mess, the poetic words of the prophet invite the discouraged to look up, to have hope, for things were about to change. "Rise, shine, for your light has come." "The poet anticipates that Jerusalem will become a beehive of productivity and prosperity, a new center of international trade. "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . ." Caravans loaded with trade goods will come from Asia and bring prosperity. This is cause for celebration. God has promised to make the city work effectively in peace, and a promise from God is very sure." (Brueggemann)

Matthew weaves the poetry of Isaiah around traveling foreigners and a paranoid king. With a bit of misdirection, Herod is pointed one way, the travelers another.

It seems the travelers from the east...we call them magi, or astrologers...are familiar with Isaiah as well. They've seen the star. They take gold, rare spices and resins with them to Jerusalem. There they will find this new king of peace who will bring well-being and prosperity.

Instead they find the current king in Jerusalem: Herod. These strangers bring threatening news to the power-hungry Herod. Panicking he demands an explanation from his advisors. They, too, know this prophecy from Isaiah. Swearing the easterners have got it all wrong, they quote from a different prophet, Micah: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old . . ."

Less lofty imaginings from a humble perspective. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground.

Herod wants to keep all this under wraps. He meets with the travelers in secret, and points them away from Jerusalem. But just in case, Herod asks them to report back when they find this child. We all know that it wasn't so he could bring a baby gift, either.

The men from the east continue the 9 miles south to Bethlehem, a sleepy, rural and unpretentious town. There, these well-read and wise men, bow down, and offer their gifts. Imagine, these smart guys who have been alert to signs in the heavens, almost miss their destination. They thought they were going to Jerusalem – bright lights, big city. The star seemed to be leading them there, so they put away their maps and followed the well-beaten road to the city. Or maybe their expectations had them stopping just a bit too soon, thinking the star was hanging over the city, instead of a dusty village a few miles beyond.

If it hadn't been for Herod's advisors, the story may have gone a bit differently. The good news is, the wise men with a long intellectual history and were masters at their craft, were also flexible enough to go on to an unknown village. And the rest is history.

Have you ever thought to yourself: "My story could have gone a bit differently?" Can we look back at our lives and see where we thought we were on the right track but something kept throwing us off? Or blocking our way?

I have a good friend who has had some tough times over the last two years. Mainly, there was a broken off engagement, major relocation, and serious financial stress. Just yesterday she said to me, "I'm here now and I wouldn't have it any other way. I kept trying to head down the road I thought was right, and kept missing the little side roads."

We can all be that way. We have such a focus on a task or a goal that we miss the more subtle signs. We are watching for a comet and miss the firefly. We have all heard the old adage, "Stop and smell the roses." It's another way of saying appreciate each moment we have and stop anticipating. I had a professor in seminary. A UCC minister and a Ph.D. in Church History, he was brilliant. And very busy. One day I saw him walking across the quad in a hurry to get somewhere. He passed by a rose bush that was growing near one of the buildings, and sure enough, he stepped off the path to literally smell the roses.

There was a time I was struggling, trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up – and I was almost 30 years old! I passed the state game warden exam but was competing with 250 others for about 6 jobs. I thought about teaching, and did some substituting for a while. Then I found a part time job at the UCC conference office in Hartford and had to supplement that with waitressing and housecleaning.

That summer all sorts of things started falling apart and I had just about had it. I was literally days away from pulling up stakes and taking up a friend on an offer to move in with her out in Denver. I sat down to talk to Margaret Jay, the minister whom I worked with, to tell her my plans. For some reason I mentioned there was a seminary in Denver and I thought I might like to take a class or two. That's when she looked at me and said, "Why don't you go to seminary here?"

At the risk of repeating myself, the rest is history.

Where are the roadblocks in your life? Or are you trying to stay on the highway and avoid the exits? Sometimes we are speeding by, checking off our to-do lists, and we miss the signs that we are supposed to be going by another road less traveled. Our faith calls us to be attentive, to watch for the signs. Even the outsiders, the travelers from the East, saw them. Though they were misdirected for a bit, they adapted. Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganized their wealth and learning, and reoriented themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.

They paid closer attention to the signs after that. And after being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another road.

Which road will you take?