

Riverside United Church
January 05, 2025 - Epiphany

Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 43: 16-21

Thus says the Lord,
 who makes a way in the sea,
 a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
 army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
 they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
Do not remember the former things,
 or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing;
 now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
 and rivers in the desert.
The wild animals will honour me,
 the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
 rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
 are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
 who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they

offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“Words for the Beginning - #7 - The Road Isn’t Straight”

Today we complete the Words for the Beginning series of reflections. The first Sunday of a new year may seem like a strange time to complete a series that speaks of the beginning. However, this series started at the beginning of Advent. The church year and the secular calendar don’t start at the same time.

And maybe that is okay because the truth of our lives is that the “beginnings” in our lives aren’t usually determined by a calendar, but rather by the circumstances of our lives. There are a variety of beginnings: moves, deaths, endings of relationships, new jobs, new relationships, new school terms - and some of the beginnings may not have external markers, but are the works of the mind and soul - realities of longing, searching, of transforming perspective, attitudes or identity.

Over the past few weeks we have heard and reflected on some wise words for whenever we experience a beginning, and I know that not everybody has been here, and I know that not everybody has been here may not remember them all. But the wise words have been:

“You are a Blessing”

“We Can’t Go Alone”

“Do the Good that is Yours to Do”

“Hope is Worth the Risk”

We didn’t emphasize it much, but on Christmas Eve the theme was “Love Knows Your Name”

“Don’t Forget to Laugh”

and today we are invited to remember the wisdom that “The Road Isn’t Straight.” These words or phrases are a bouquet of wisdom whether we find ourselves at the beginning, at the ending or somewhere in between.

The biblical base for today’s word of wisdom is the story of the magi as they travel to see the Christ Child. We sang that story in “The First Noel” and we heard it again as David read it from Matthew. The magi come from distant lands in search of something more than they know. It is the author of the gospel of Matthew that includes the magi in the story and it is amazing that we know very little about them.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her sermon “Home by Another Way,” which is included in her book by that title, speaks of how so much creative work by artists, by storytellers, by musicians, by poets has been made out of this brief story. She writes:

“So much has been made of this story about which we know so little. They were not kings, of course, and there were not three of them, at least according to Matthew. We do not know who they were, where they came from, or how many of them there were. We do not know how long it took them to get to Bethlehem or how old Jesus was by the time they got there. We are not even sure about that famous star. It is not that the facts don’t matter. It is just that they don’t matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether happen or not.” (pp 27-28 Home By Another Way)

The gift of the story of these traveling magi, seekers of truth, embodiment of wisdom, guides of hope, is far beyond the factual details, for it speaks to our souls of the human quest for meaning, and the ability to discern another way home when we recognize that need.

For the magi were warned in a dream to not be Herod’s spies, and so they find another way home and that is a reminder that the realities and experiences of our lives affect the path we travel. The values and choices of our lives matter as we live in this reality of a world that has drifted into swamps and valleys of polarization, greed and indifference.

It is difficult not to feel that we have to go it alone, when so many messages give us the impression that we are inadequate and less than we should be. The blessing of God is that Holy Love knows our name and so we are reminded to be strengthened in identity that is given to us, not earned on the open market.

The magi remind us of that the quest for meaning is deeper than the popular trends of the time. There are different sources of authority, of truth, of power. Within most faith traditions there are stories of traveling in order to know meaning and purpose.

And their story reminds that the road isn’t straight. The straight and narrow will rarely lead to meaning or a deepening of identity or purpose. There are curves in the road. There are hills and valleys. At times, we won’t be able to see what is ahead.

Last Sunday, Karen - our ministry student and I - had a wonderful conversation about how we enjoy driving in the fog. Now, that might be the result of a Newfoundlander and a Maritimer missing the frequency of the fog here in Ottawa, but I think it was a bit deeper. Traveling in the fog trains our vision in sharper ways and that is true whether we are behind a wheel or living in the reality of the unknown of the soul.

When I set out on a journey to some place I’ve never been, it is still my preference to look at a map and then visualize the route. I am getting more accustomed to using GPS technology, but it still isn’t my go-to method of finding direction. I take a little bit of delight in choosing a different route than prescribed, and love to hear the GPS - you know what it says? “recalculating”. The

road of the soul isn't straight and we are recalculating all the time in terms of how to respond, how to trust, how to enact love, how to embody compassion, how to affirm the dignity of another.

On the road, there may be dreams, there may be other clues, there may be gut reactions, that prompt us to take another way and all that is part of the maturing of our minds and souls in the way of meaning and peace, the way revealed by the Christ Child. One of the truths of our faith story - and all those who have gone before us and who walk with us is that trust is an important companion on the journey. We might not be able to trust everyone we meet or know, but we can trust our inner voices that guide us and we can trust that we are not alone.

So, as this beginning of a new year is upon us, it's helpful to know that the path of this year we know right from the beginning will not be straight, will not be predictable, will not be scripted, will not be a smooth path of living happily ever after. There will be challenges, there will be opportunities, there will be grief, there will be surprises, there will be fog, there will be bright sunny days.

As a congregation, 2025 will be an important year. At the end of May, my path of living will take the fork in the road of retirement and you folks will find different leadership as this community of faith will continue to make a loving difference in the world. Both paths beyond the fork in the road will take adjustment, but we will have in our souls the shared experiences of walking, searching and serving together.

I will not talk about that fork in the road every Sunday between now and then, but it is important for us to know that is coming. There are many things about this coming year that we don't know about and so we trust.

The path of faith, and of life is continually about finding another way home, because we are constantly learning, discerning, exploring, grieving, living. And there are times when we feel lost, without direction, without hope. And we don't have to know where we are going to know that God is going with us. We are not alone.

We are reminded in the words of Isaiah, the promise and vision of the Holy:

I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

This Words for the Beginning theme comes from a collective of creative and wise artists and poets called "A Sanctified Art." One of the poets is the Rev. Sarah Speed and she offers a poem for this week's theme. The poem is entitled: "Field Notes."

With tears in your eyes,

you name all the bumps
and zigzags your life has taken.
With clenched teeth
and a hummingbird pulse,
you wake up and wonder—how did I get here?
In the last 40 days of
desert wandering, you say
you haven't heard God's voice once.
You say you miss when God was close,
when God used to sing the harmony line.
So you yell at the sky,
 begging God to drop a pin,
 to name the road,
 to draw you a map.
You lament the way this life isn't easy.
You ask me—was the road ever straight and narrow,
 or was that all a lie?
But then you crest the mountain,
and I don't hear from you for a while,
because God was growing
in the lilac field
on the other side of the hill.
God was scattered
among the pebbles
of the road you never planned to take.
Isn't it amazing, you say,
 there are a million roads home
and God walks every single one of them.

Amen.