

“Taking another road home”

1. When the boys were little, we let them ride their bikes together in our neighborhood in Indy because we knew they could always find their way back home.
 - a. They were in the early elementary grades
 - i. The streets in our neighborhood were pretty easy to figure out.
 - ii. Perfectly straight grid.
 - iii. Numbered streets got bigger numbers going north (we lived at the corner of 11th Street and Bosart Avenue, close to Irvington on the Near Eastside).
 - b. The boys could go just about anywhere, but with certain conditions.
 - i. They had to ride together, with each other. We didn't let them ride alone.
 - ii. Friends could join them.
 - iii. Along quiet streets, they could ride on the street.
 - iv. Along somewhat busier streets, they had to stay on the sidewalks.
 - v. They had to stop at all the stop signs.
 - vi. The biggest rule was that until they got older they couldn't cross 10th Street unsupervised, because it was a very busy street.
 1. Tempting them at the corner of 10th and Bosart, a block from our house, on the not-allowed side of the street, sits a McDonalds, calling them, beckoning them!
 - c. We felt they could handle that bit of independence.
 - i. Mind you, they had no cell phone or GPS.
 - ii. They were able to trust their own sense of where home was
 - iii. We knew that no matter how far they had biked, or even if they traveled to a “new” part of the neighborhood, they could always find their way back home.
2. You may have noticed how our biblical story ended today: It said the sages headed back home, only not the same way they had gotten there.
 - a. They came to realize, only later, that they had barely escaped real danger by crossing paths with the powerful yet insecure King Herod.
 - b. We seldom think of Herod in this story, focusing instead on the intriguing idea of these Sages or Magi traveling day and night following a star, heading in a completely unknown direction.
 - i. They had traveled a long distance guided by a unique star traveling westward– a sign from the heavens!
 - ii. There are several theories about that “star” and one resource (Malina, p.32) identifies it as a comet.
 - iii. In the ancient world those kinds of signs in the sky could mean bad news or good news.
 - iv. An ancient scholar (Pliny the Elder) wrote (a few years after Jesus) about the meaning of such comets: “Sometimes there is a comet in the western sky, usually a terrifying star and not easily expiated.” [dealt with] (Malina, p.32)

- v. King Herod the Great was a big deal.
 - 1. He was Jewish and had been appointed by the Roman Empire as King of the region of Judea,
 - 2. He had led important building efforts in the region, including the expansion of the Jewish Temple (which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and reconstructed after the Israelites returned from exile five centuries before Jesus).
- vi. Herod would have been on edge by the very appearance of the star,
- vii. And not just Herod, but all in Jerusalem who saw the sign in the heavens!
- viii. So, imagine that these sages come looking for the new king of the Judeans, and that question reaches the ears of the sitting king of the Judeans!
- ix. Herod would have felt his power was being threatened.
- x. Innocently enough, the sages, looking for royalty, had gone to a perfectly logical place: to the palace in Jerusalem!
- xi. But, of course, that's not where Jesus had been born, and the presence and message of the sages sends the court into an upheaval.
- xii. They're lucky they weren't killed on the spot!
- c. Still somehow unaware they were in danger, the sages continue their journey (now also with the help what the scholars had told Herod, that their destination should be Bethlehem)
 - i. They see the star stop, and their long journey is rewarded, as they walk into the place where the child was, with Mary his mother.
 - ii. They were there to offer their respect to the child, bringing gifts and bowing to the child's power as king.
- d. Only then does God whisper in their ear in a dream, and they went back home, not backtracking, but going down a more rural, out-of-the-way route back East from where they had come.
- 3. Once again this year, we will also have a star to follow symbolically, as the sages did.
 - a. Ours is a star which will also help us encounter Jesus in our lives in unexpected places.
 - i. Our star will prompt us towards renewed commitments, towards needed changes, towards life-giving introspection.
 - ii. And all that will help us encounter the presence and grace of Jesus in our daily lives, in our encounters with one another.
 - b. Our star, as with the sages, won't leave us stranded in an unknown place
 - c. The journey of learning will always bring us "back home," back to the place where we belong, but rest assured we will be changed by the journey.
 - d. It may even be that the star will challenge us so much, that the only way to go back home, back to ourselves, will be a roundabout way through new beginnings.
- 4. Rest assured, God will whisper in your ear until you're safely back home, but know that you will be changed by the journey.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-13>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herod_the_Great

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story of a event in your life which meant change for you (so that you could divide your life as “before the event” and “after the event”).
2. Look at the star you received in worship today: what might God be whispering in your ear about your life with this star?