

Another Road?

by

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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, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶“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.”” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

God is many things: omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, eternal, infinite... all excellent traits for the divine ruler of creation, but all traits that put God at a serious disadvantage when it comes to planning trips. Scripture is filled with God's seeming inability to plan an efficient trip. Peoples, prophets, they all seem to take the "scenic route" when God is leading the way. Of course, they eventually arrive, but if time has no impact, you do not need to sleep and blisters are a theological impossibility, you don't really need to worry about efficiency. Forty years in the desert is just the blink of an eye. Time and distance don't factor into the Almighty's plans. Why should they?

So it's not that surprising that here, just one chapter into the Gospel according to Matthew, we're transported from the sleepy town of Nazareth in Galilee to somewhere so far off that it doesn't even need a name. Somewhere in the East. Beyond the borders of the Roman Empire, somewhere in remnants of an ancient land, Magi are looking at the sky, and they see something so wonderful, so awe inspiring, so extraordinary that they cannot look away.

We can guess about the Magi—they were scholars who walked a razor's edge between science and mystery. Spending a lifetime understanding the movement of the heavens. Both their interpretation of the natural world and the supernatural were based on what they could observe. Their understanding of place, time, and season were all defined by the stars they had mapped and known; when a new star appeared. Not only could they not look away, they could not stay away.

Following a star is not easy. It gives you a point of reference, but not a path. It would be like me offering directions to New York city by saying: head north.

The Magi—the kings, the wise ones, set out: a different road than they had imagined. Like the scientists in the movies who finally leave their laboratories, to see that thing they had spent a lifetime studying in

the flesh. I wonder what the conversations were like as they camped out along the way?

When they are within miles of the destination, they make a wrong turn.

It's understandable. Bethlehem and Jerusalem are 6 miles apart—and again, starlight is not an exact marker. They're on the search for King, so they head into the city and to the palace—it's a wrong turn, and yet, even that is part of journey.

The Magi arrive in wonderful fashion. Walking into Herod's court with the question, "Where is the child who was born the King of the Jews?" I can imagine the room was silent. All eyes were on Herod.

Herod of course is the king. He was the King of Judea and "of the Jews" *as elected by the Roman senate*.

He bought his way into power and maintained his power by remaining a staunch ally to the Roman legions that provided him strength. He was happy to kill anyone in his way: family members, community leaders, random guy on the street, it didn't matter. Needless to say between the brutality and the taxation rate he imposed, he wasn't particularly well loved by the people. The Sanhedrin—the priests of the temple centered in Jerusalem had condemned his brutality and well, they disliked the fact that he started appointing his own chief priests to rule over them. The Pharisees—the rural zealots, the ones who got the local synagogues going, they saw him as a puppet of the empire. At the end of the day, Herod had power, wealth, an army, and a decree bearing the seal of Augustus himself all saying that he was indeed *the King*. The people, who were sitting in his court when the magi arrived, knew that history. They knew that he was prone to violence and just little sensitive about his position. They knew how to keep quiet, because after all they were still alive.

Then came the magi. “Nice to meet you Herod, but where is the king of the Jews? Where is the child? The one that the heavens declared King, not the one that the Romans installed. We have come to pay *him* homage.”

We know that they were kind of akin to scholars, we all know that scholars are not always the most subtle people in the world, but this was bold, brazen.

Imagine being one of the Magi, standing there in the palace. You state your question--maybe the common Greek language isn't your best, and as you see the people around you react, you begin to wonder if something was lost in translation. Your colleague is shrugging, and you're wishing that you had invested in that translator app or actually tried Rosetta stone on those long hours on the camel.

One question, your question, terrifies a king. “Where is the child?” One question, uttered by foreigners, aliens, gentiles, force the religious community to dig deep into their tradition, to re-read their sacred texts and their prophecies.

It's not the most efficient path. Its not a particularly safe one. But the scribes, the scribes and the priests start digging, digging until they find that scrap of Micah, “In Bethlehem.”

Its quite a detour.

Was their hope as they brought the scrolls out? Were there whispers among the scribes? Herod plays it cool, and the Magi leave.

This time they follow the star that last six miles to Bethlehem and to child.

It wasn't a path anyone could have planned.

They weren't the people Matthew's readers would have been expecting, but these foreign scholars with odd clothes, and strange accents are the ones kneeling by the manger—not the scribes, or court, or really anyone, just these strangers. Pushing gifts so lavish as to be bordering on absurd into the worn hands of a carpenter and his new wife. What good is myrrh when don't even have housing in this little town?

The road keeps changing, the path keeps shifting and it almost seems unfair to the Magi and to Mary and to Joseph and even to Jesus, as their dreams tell them that must find yet another way.

It would be nice if we could open our Bibles find that those glossy maps are labeled with our names and legend that tells us each of our stops and how long the trip will take.

But God never offers a map, only a destination—a point of light that we can fix our eyes upon so that as the road changes, our way does not. Epiphany is the celebration of that light. Celebration that it was never hidden, no, that the light was bright enough to call Magi from their towers beyond the world that gospel writers knew, even if the king six miles away could not see it. Epiphany marks the end of Christmas—we are no longer finding our way to Bethlehem, but rather are following the light, we are searching for that fixed point that will dance into the waters of the Jordan, turn water in wine, calm the seas, we turn our feet so that our path intersects with that light.

God doesn't always plan the easiest trips, and at the beginning of a new year, I can imagine we're all wondering what strange turns the next year will bring. But today, in this moment, we shift our eyes a little, we squint a little and we look for the light. The trips are never straight forward, but even as we keep our eyes fixed, we remember this promise from the prophet Jeremiah:

See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here.

With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."