

Sermon – Matthew 2:1:1-12

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

Epiphany – Year A

5 January 2020

“By Another Road”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. This morning we observe the feast of Epiphany, which actually falls on January 6, tomorrow. Today is the twelfth and final day of Christmas, drummers drumming and all that. The season is over. Christmas began in oh-so-joyful celebration, gave way to languid hours with little to do, and now, without so much as a by your leave, is over. This week will see us unto the breach once more. Our family did manage to get away, albeit briefly, this past week. We travelled west to Galena on New Year’s Day. I love that drive. Slowly, the city gives way to the suburbs, the freeway speeds you toward Rockford, and past that? Farms and rolling hills. The destination is lovely, the journey itself is a panacea. The cares of the world fall away with each mile. I think the power of the journey is rooted in its contrast to my daily routine, marked by an endless series of round trips up and down Harlem Avenue. North and south, back and forth, again and again in a claustrophobic repetition that haunts my nightmares and stalks my soul. Well, that may be overstating things a bit, but the truth holds: it was good to travel by a different road. That brief time away allowed me to come home a different person. Rested, focused, centered. Ready for a new year.
2. As we celebrate Epiphany, we accompany the Magi from the East as they travel by different roads on a journey that changes everything for them. Discerning in the rising of a new star something fundamental changing in the very fabric of the cosmos, these astrologers leave home to search for this

- child who has been born king of the Jews. They bring gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy and declaring Jesus' identity. Gold, a gift fit for a king; frankincense to rise heavenward, a gift for a God; and myrrh, used in the embalming of bodies, a gift fit for the One who would grow to offer himself for the sake of the world. Their journey ends in worship, kneeling before the child and his mother, and we see God's long plan coming to fruition as these Gentiles are drawn into Israel's story, showing forth that this King of the Jews is God, King for all people.
3. This is not the end of the story for the Magi, of course, nor is theirs the only story happening. Even as they worship Jesus, the Light of God shining forth in the world, the darkness of the world pushes back. Herod, the king not of but simply over the Jews, learns from the wise men of Jesus' birth. Jesus' birth does not put an end to the machinations of evil and violence in our world. As it was then, so it is today. While the Christmas season has unfolded and the calendar has turned to another year, old evils have sought to make inroads in the world. 2019 ended with a stark reminder that antisemitism continues to be a powerful force for evil. The vicious attack at a Hanukkah celebration in New York was, sadly, just the latest in a rising wave of vitriol and violence directed at our Jewish neighbors. 2020 begins with the killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, an incident with repercussions yet unknown but which makes us feel, and fear, like we're teetering toward war.
 4. What do we do, then, on this last day of the New Year? Following the example of the Magi, we gather to worship the God and King who was born, and who would die, to save us from sin, death, the devil and all evils. And then, again taking our cues from the wise men, we insist on dreaming God's dream, not our own. We go home by another road. Having worshipped and received the gifts of Jesus, our lives are transformed. We move in new directions. In the face of antisemitism, we remember that when God took on flesh, it was Jewish flesh. We recall that *we* were the ones outside of God's promised

people; it is only in grace that we enter in. And so we walk the road of solidarity with God's first people, standing with them against hatred and violence wherever it is found. In the face of violence and war, we stand for peace, for as long as we can. As for Iran going forward, I will not pretend to have answers to complex geopolitical questions, but as a theologian I know this: God values human life so much that God became human. And when we took this life from Jesus, God gave it back, insisting that life will have the word that is both final and unending. Whatever this year brings, we are called to walk as new people on a new road whose name is Jesus, born to be our Way, and our Truth, and our Life. As the people of God, we work for peace.

5. The Incarnation is itself a new journey, for us and for God. God desires so deeply to get us where we need to go that God comes in Christ to lead the way. Jesus does not simply teach us how to walk or show us where to go. He is the Word that is the epiphanic light illuminating our path. And when we fail to follow his clear, pure life of love and grace, he gives himself up to death to show that not even death can stop God's love and grace. A new world is dawning, even in these days that weigh so heavily on so many. It is a world in which God's promises are opened up to all people, the nations streaming into God's presence that brightens the world as the Bethlehem star once lit up the night sky. Isaiah foretold that the people would come to see God and that, when we did, the very light of God would light us up from within. Behold Christ, friends, and watch yourselves become radiant with God's glory. In days of darkness, be the light of the world on behalf of the Light of the World. Give up your old ways, abandon your old roads. There is no shortage of Herods in our world, those who insist on evil, who lust for power and live in thrall to death. But God's dream shows forth new ways, a new Way, Jesus Christ. Arise then, and shine forth the glory of God to the nations, that all the nations would put an end to the old ways, that all people who see in this child of Bethlehem the hope we need in these and all dark days. The cares of the

world will not fall away quite yet, but one day they will. For now, God has come to walk with us on the journey and light our way home, in this new year and beyond.

6. And now, before an amen, a coda: Sometimes our journeys call us down different roads. Our time with Pastor Lauren, Pastor Dave, Owen, and Caroline is drawing toward an end. We celebrate with you today, both what God has done in and through you at Grace and what God will do in and through you in the years to come. It has been a blessing to Grace that God brought your journey together with ours for this season of life and ministry, and we entrust the next part of your journey into God's hands. And though there is sadness in seeing our roads diverge, we remember a promise of our faith: People who walk with Jesus are never far apart. We remain connected through Christ, and our different paths will one day be brought back together in him. Thanks for walking with us a while. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.