

Home by Another Way

Mark 2:1-12

First Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 7) 2024

Kyle Childress

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.*

- Wendell Berry, from *Our Real Work*

Matthew says, “And the magi, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, left for their own country by another way” (Matthew 2:12).

Have you ever returned home by another way?

Jane and I came home from Missouri many years ago by another way. Instead of our standard route down through Oklahoma, we decided to travel what looked like on the map as the more direct route straight down western Arkansas. Bad choice. What looked direct on the map was anything but. Up and down and around hills and hollers and small towns and slow-moving log trucks on the two-lane highway, it took forever and was exhausting. We’ve never done it since.

On the other hand, I remember the first time I ever attempted to return home by another way. I was a freshman in Baylor and because of road construction my normal way home was backed-up with traffic. It was a beautiful afternoon, I was young and single and feeling adventurous, so I decided to strike out across the country without even a map. I knew where I wanted to go and had a very good

sense of direction, but I had not anticipated how country roads often do not go in the direction you think they should or they change direction and unless you're from around there, you have no idea of where the road is taking you.

I found myself lost. One farm road looked just like another and the few and far between road signs were not helpful. I drove up on farmhouse, which looked almost out of a movie. An older farmwoman was sweeping a big front porch, and her husband was getting off a tractor in the barnyard. I got out of my car but kept the car door open and ready for my quick retreat due to the multiple farm dogs keeping me at bay. I yelled up to the woman that I was lost. I was a Baylor student on my way home and explained my dilemma. The farmer walked up and invited me up to the porch and his wife brought out big glasses of sweet, iced tea and we sat as he told me the various routes I could take, how long they had farmed that place, and they wanted to hear all about where I was from and who my people were and what they did, and on and on. After nearly two hours I gave my apologies for not staying for supper telling them my parents would be waiting for me.

For a nineteen-year-old college boy, homesick and lost, that was a wonderfully warm experience of going home by another way. I've never forgotten their kindness and hospitality.

We never know what may happen when we go home by another way.

Yesterday was Epiphany when we remember the story of the Wise Men. Epiphany is a word meaning "manifestation," as in the various and unexpected ways God in Christ is manifested among us following his birth and incarnation. Our job is to keep our eyes open and hearts ready to receive Christ as he shows up in surprising ways and in turn, we discover ourselves changed or thinking in new

ways. Epiphany is a time for creativity and imagination. It's about going home by another way.

Starting with the Wise Men following the Star, the consistent theme of the Sundays following Epiphany is Light. The Gospel of John says, Christ is “the true light which enlightens everyone ...” (John 1:9). So, we get Scriptures about Light and Lamps, Darkness and Sin, and how Jesus is the True Light. Never more than during Epiphany, we unexpectedly meet Christ and discover lightbulbs going on over our heads and in our church.

Both Matthew's famous version of the birth of Jesus with Joseph, the Wise Men, and Herod, and Luke's even more famous version, with no room in the inn, shepherds, and angels, are full of light and darkness, and to use John's terminology, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (John 1:5). But my old my, the darkness tries.

One practice to help us hear these nativity stories and these Epiphany stories of the light shining in the darkness so that God speaks to us in new ways, is to pay attention to how this young couple, Joseph and Mary – or let's put them in our contemporary context – Jose and Maria – with their new baby are swept up in political forces larger than themselves – a new law signed by Caesar forces them to leave home and live on the road without shelter. If they had had money and privilege, I guarantee they would not have heard the innkeeper say, “No room,” as he slammed the door in their faces.

One week ago, on CBS' program *Face the Nation*, South Carolina U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, that paragon of political integrity, said, “When you come to our border, we say: ‘I'm sorry, we're full.’”

You can't make this stuff up.

Matthew says a mean, power-hungry dictator sends his SWAT teams to find this baby who is a threat to his power and directs them to kill all the babies in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under.

These stories keep reminding us the darkness is real.

But they also remind us so is the light. God sends a heavenly messenger to Jose in a dream and tells him and Maria to grab their baby and flee to another country for safety, which they do – just in time.

All of this is swirling around the Wise Men who have been searching for this same baby to worship him. Likewise, just in the nick of time, they are warned by God in a dream to escape Bethlehem and Herod's SWAT teams kicking in doors.

So, when Matthew says they went home by another way, it is not only that they took a different road but also that in the Light of the Living God, they go home as changed people. Because of the Light, they see differently than they had before. They realize that the world is changing, and they are being changed, too.

Darkness is at work. But the Light of the Living God is at work too, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Part of what these old stories tell us is that we live in a world full of grief and fear, but it is also full of hope. As journalist Rebecca Solnit says, "Grief and hope can coexist" (*Hope in the Dark*, p. xiv).

And part of what I want to say to you, is we can't do this church stuff like we used to do it. Church is a community traveling together in the Light of Christ. It supports one another in the grief, prays for one another, and encourages one

another in hope. And let me be emphatically clear, the old ways will not suffice. We've got to go another way.

With that in mind, I applied to, and we have been accepted into the “Thriving Congregations Initiative,” a Lilly Endowment funded program through the CBF, that trains congregational leadership teams of four to six members in an accelerator-style learning community with other church community teams and trainers. The training lasts a year and meets 10 times online and three times in person.

In turn, those of you who will be trained will return to us another way and train us – train us to think differently, imagine differently, and practice differently.

We're also at work planning a new church-wide Lenten study that will involve once-a-week gatherings around tables of soup and bread as we deepen our connections with God and with each other. If we're going to survive, much less thrive, we have to do it with one another.

Going home by another way means we might not know where we're going, and we might be lost. Which is another way of recognizing that we're no longer in control. We might even need to stop and ask for directions.

Wendell Berry put it this way, “It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work, and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey.” So, together we have work to do and a journey to make.

There is a tradition in Celtic Christianity called *peregrinatio pro Christo*, meaning wandering for Christ. It differs from pilgrimage because a pilgrim knows their destination. These wanderers for Christ had no idea where they were going.

Often, they went to sea in tiny round boats, or coracles, sailing forth without a rudder and simply trusted that amid the winds and waves, God was guiding them.

One of our favorite hymns, *We, O God, Unite our Voices*, found just inside the front cover of our hymnal, says, “*Not our choice the wind’s direction, unforeseen the calm or gale. Thy great ocean swells before us, and our ship seems small and frail. Fierce and gleaming is Thy mystery drawing us to shore unknown, plunge us on with hope and courage ‘til Thy harbor is our home.*”

Does it sound a little scary. It should.

But the fierce and gleaming mysterious Light is drawing us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.