

Sermon ✝ January 2, 2022
Matthew 2:1-12
Frank Maxwell

Throughout the world, children who acted out the nativity a few weeks ago re-enacted the drama of Epiphany. This time, the characters include the wise men, bringing gifts which indicate that Jesus is the Messiah.

I'm intrigued by the four dreams that structure the actions of the wise ones and Joseph. We aren't actually told what the dreams were, but rather are told what Joseph and the wise ones decided to do because of their dreams.

Because of a dream, the wise men did not return to Herod who had sent them, but rather they traveled home another way.

Joseph's first dream guided him to *go to Egypt* (with Mary and Jesus) until Herod's death. Joseph's second dream guided him to *get up and return to Israel*.

Because of the third dream, which he had while he, Mary, and Jesus were en route to Judea, Joseph realized that they *should not go there, but to Galilee and to Nazareth*. Each of these dreams provided guidance to *go somewhere else*. Mixed in with all this dreaming are expectations that are being fulfilled—some surprises, the unexpected. By going different places than originally intended, two expectations were fulfilled.

In the narrative, Joseph went to Egypt in part because his return would fulfill the prediction that the Messiah would "come out of Egypt" (after Joseph had fled there with his family). Likewise, by going to Nazareth, the expectation that he would be called a Nazarene was fulfilled. Though some of these events unfolded as expected, some were surprises that would alter the course of history.

Today we've gotten kind of used to Jesus at Christmas and Epiphany, but the gospel of the grown-up Jesus surprises us as much as it did his colleagues and friends.

The culture in which Jesus lived differed from ours. It valued people not so much as individuals, as we do, but as part of a household—a household with strict hierarchies: a male at the head, women, children, and slaves.

Also, for the Jews, religious purity was crucial to maintain; obeying their laws was a major part of Jewish identity. For example, one of the purity laws was that a Jew was not to eat with Gentiles. A Jew overstepping this boundary could be expelled from the community.

Into this culture comes the unexpected, Jesus' grown-up message: "*All are equal and morally free. Obeying religious laws is not what is most important; it's our inward relation to God.*"

Can you imagine what a surprise this would be to ears that were accustomed to definite laws about everything, down to what to eat and with whom? Jesus emphatically taught that no other person or any hierarchy was to rule between God and another person.

It's a surprise to most of us today to hear the grown-up Jesus' gospel of freedom and equality under God. The message still doesn't fit our expectations.

If we were as insightful and observant as the wise ones on this Epiphany—the day we celebrate the revelation of Jesus as the Messiah—we would probably *go home another way*.

How might we *go home another way*? First, we could reflect upon some inequality in our relating to others. Perhaps we feel slightly superior to another, because . . . or, we consider ourselves inferior because . . . *Going home another way* may mean honest confession and some real changes in the relationship.

How else might we *go home another way*? Second, we might consider some unresolved event of the recent holidays: the insult at the table or our disappointment that a loved one was not with the family. *Going home another way* may mean grieving or feeling the disappointment . . . but then letting it go, moving forward, being free.

How else might we *go home another way*? Finally, we might consider a personal habit that has been limiting, but that we really haven't had the will to change, or we don't honestly know how to change. Freedom comes through physical therapists, physicians, counselors, shelters from domestic abuse, twelve-step groups, and sharing with good friends. *Going home another way* may mean a resolve to take genuine action to make the change or to get help.

When you leave here today, I want you physically to *go home another way*. Pretend you're a wise one. Pretend you are Joseph, traveling with Jesus. I don't care how you do it, but take a different route home this morning. It's very hard to go home another way. Our cars are on automatic. I know. You turn out of the parking lot, turn right, go left, and on you go. I do too.

Going home another way this day, after worship, will symbolize your *freedom* before God. You can relate equally with others. You can move on from disappointment. You can seek wisdom.

The very adult message of Jesus still surprises us. You and I can be wise ones this coming season of Epiphany. We can see the Christ. If we're headed anywhere God doesn't advise, we can go another way.