

The Road Less Traveled

sermon digest

January 9, 2011

Matthew 2:10-23a

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I grew up with a family story about the night our house burned to the ground. My parents Walter and Dessa married on Christmas Eve, 1930, a year after the famous stock market crash on “Black Tuesday,” October 29, 1929. They were young, attempting to survive on a farm in what has become known as the Oklahoma dust bowl. Farming was the only vocational option available to my father in that time and place. Mother wanted to be near family, my maternal grandparents, who lived a few miles away. Life was hard. The national economy was a wreck. Money was extremely scarce. The young family including two daughters was dependent on the begrudging land for survival.

Then, one night the old farm house caught fire and burned to the ground. I never knew the cause; I doubt that it mattered. The eerie part of the story was Mother’s memory of Dad’s rush to save their few furnishings. As he was carrying the furniture into the yard, he hummed a tune. Not only was singing inappropriate for the occasion, it was totally out of character for my dad. In my entire life, I never heard him sing, but something about the moment called for radical behavior. The song became a symbol for what would come.

The fortunate fire shocked my parents into a search for a new way of life. I was born in the transition as the family traveled to California then to New Mexico and finally to Houston, Texas, where my farmer father went to work in the steel industry. Like thousands caught up in the second wave of the industrial revolution, our rural family moved to the big city and took up a radically different, suburban way of life. I can remember Mother’s distant gaze as she shifted into her philosophical self and interpreted the meaning of events. “If it had not been for that fire,” she would say, “we might well have been stuck in the Oklahoma dust bowl for the rest of our lives.”

Because of the fortunate family fire, my parents were understanding and supportive when I decided to load up my little family including a newborn son and venture out into the mysterious unknown world of Kentucky and a seminary right on the Mason-Dixon line. There my vision of God expanded into a new world with global implications for the future, and in spite of death and numerous other mishaps, I still view that venture as the turn in life that has defined my meaning.

Sometimes the imagination is both larger and more accurate than the bare facts. Biblical scholar Brent Landau recently gave us a new look at the old story. He discovered in the Vatican Library a manuscript attributed to the magi of Matthew 2 and last year published the first English translation of *Revelation of the Magi*. The document, written as personal testimony of the magi, is reminiscent of the bulk of Christian literature that emerged in the first Christian centuries; it is loaded with mystery and myth. But, as Landau notes (p. 3), the enormous gaps in Matthew’s story demand to be filled. Matthew’s omissions are like a vacuum drawing readers into inquiry and speculation. So, through the centuries, Christians have assigned names, arrived at the head-count of three magi, and determined that the magi are really kings. History has usually located the magi as members of an astrological cult from Persia, although *Revelation of the Magi* locates them in an unknown land of Shir. In fact the document disputes many of the established traditions. If Landau’s translation establishes a new image for the magi, we shall be forced to rescind and perhaps re-send many of our Christmas cards. The document goes far beyond the few sentences in Matthew and the visitation with the child Jesus. The story follows the mystery visitors on to their conversion and baptism under the ministry of the Apostle Thomas.

Eduard Schweitzer recounts a historical event that may have influenced embellishments of the story. In 66 CE, astrologers from Persia traveled to Naples in the company of King Tiridates to worship Nero as king of the universe. They were absolutely certain that the stars pointed them to Nero.

Like many of the stories in the twilight zone of Christian memory, the truth of the story is not in the facts so much as in the potential of mystery. The Feast of the Epiphany, which focuses on the visitation of the magi to the child Jesus, is older than the celebration of Christmas. Strange that the story of Gentile visitors to the birth of the Christ should be found only in Matthew, the most Jewish Gospel, but the imagination of Matthew extends beyond his own time and place. Long before the events recorded in the Gospels, the Hebrew Prophets envisioned a new world order where the

natural hostility between Jews and Gentiles would end with peace on earth and good will toward the people with whom God is pleased. So Matthew allows that these mystery guests, aliens from another world, Persian magicians who watched for God's Word in the stars, would be caught up in the coming of the Messiah in a way that the Hebrew scholars of the time not only missed but rejected.

By the time of Matthew's Gospel, Gentile believers were pouring into the church. Suddenly the message of the gospel was no longer a provincial story about a privileged people; it had become in Christ the word of hope for all of God's children regardless of language, race, or religion. So the final doxology in Matthew's Gospel is, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." The larger world outside of biblical Palestine that intruded on Jewish life with foreign visitors at the birth was the world into which Jesus sent his church in his final word to disciples. The message of the gospel, the message of Matthew's Gospel had gone full circle.

The paths we choose in life often become the key to meaning. The Depression era poet Robert Frost captured the American imagination with his poem "The Road Not Taken." Especially in my parents' generation Americans ventured out on roads less traveled to find destinations that opened new opportunities and vistas beyond the imagination. Frost later called it a "tricky poem." He explained that the words implied far more than he intended. He wrote the poem to poke fun at a friend who always complained that they should have tried another path when they walked together through the woods. However, the verse engaged the imagination and became a door that people applied to their own stories. The public even gave it a new title based on the final lines:

Two roads diverged in a wood and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The meaning was never really in author's intention; it came to rest in the personal experience of the reader.

Something of that same character infects the story of the magi in Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus. The story of the magi ends with the haunting words, "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." Matthew obviously sent the magi off on a different path in order to avoid a return to Herod, just as Joseph's dreams sent him off in a radical move to Egypt to protect his family from Herod's wrath. But, much like Robert Frost's poem, through the centuries the road less traveled has suggested far more than Matthew intended. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory mused that no one who comes to the Christ can return by the same road. He suggested that the radical personal revolution in the encounter with the Christ leaves nothing like it was before, so that even the return home is by different paths. People who meet the Christ are directed to venture out in new ways even to the old places.

The foreign visitors come from an unidentified alien place to the Jewish homeland. Much ado is made of the star that leads to the place of birth and the consultation of Herod with the Jewish scholars on the exact location of the new king's birth. Bethlehem is the location of Joseph's house—not a stable or a cave as in Luke. After finding the right place, the magi take a new route home to avoid Herod, and Joseph sets out on an unusual venture for a Jewish family of the time in heading out to Egypt and finally arriving in Nazareth of Galilee. Some believe the whole story is intended to counter the persistent criticism that no prophet comes from Galilee, that Matthew was explaining how Jesus came to be from Nazareth and how Nazareth became the door to the new world of the Christian gospel. The road less traveled taken by the magi was a symbol of the new roads taken by the Christ and finally by his church.

The gospel of Christ leads us into new ventures. The evangel, the New Testament word *euangelion*, carried over into old English "god-spell," the good news. The gospel constantly calls us out of ruts to venture into new paths. Christ came for the redemption of the world, something that cannot happen just by conservation of the past. There is something about religion rooted in history that is naturally conservative. We draw our meaning from the foundations of our lives in past events, but we make a radical mistake in thinking that we can find our meaning simply through preservation and reconstruction of the past. The baby of Bethlehem is remembered not because he pickled the past in the state he found it. He became the most radical prophet Israel ever knew. In more ways than

could be acknowledged by his followers, Jesus was every bit the radical revolutionary accused by his enemies and judged by his executioners, although without violence. Neither the world as a whole or the persons in the world in particular could be saved through sameness.

We probably know the title "The Road Less Traveled" more through the psychiatrist author M. Scott Peck than through the poet Robert Frost. Peck chose the title *The Road Less Traveled* for the book that would define him, and at least three of his many published works would be sequels to that title. In *Further Along the Road Less Traveled* he told his own story of a venture into spiritual growth. Peck was not a Christian, not particularly religious, at the time of the writing of his first book, but he pointed his readers in the final chapter toward the venture of spiritual growth. He probably offended a lot of Christians in confessing that his road to God was through Zen Buddhism. He also strongly affirms the work of AA in the rescue of a multitude of people who find their spiritual selves after a life of alcoholism.

Like the magi of Matthew's Gospel, Peck was on a journey that led to a new venture and a meaning of significance in life that would end in finding and following the one we call the Christ.