

“The Road Isn’t Straight”
Isaiah 43:16-21, Matthew 2:1-12
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We have come to the last Sunday in our *Words for the Beginning* sermon series that we began on the first Sunday of Advent. Even though Advent comes at the end of the calendar year, it is the beginning of the liturgical year, so this has been a series about beginning again and about being equipped to begin again with God’s words and promises. Since this is now the first Sunday in the calendar year, many of us are probably still thinking about that question that was posed each week before Christmas when the Advent candles were lit: How do we begin again?

When you begin a trip, you probably begin with a destination plugged in to your GPS that will then guide you to your destination, or, if it’s somewhere you’ve been before, you begin with at least a mental map of the route you’ll be taking. As we begin a new year, we can’t put a destination into a GPS, but we might begin with some ideas about what we want to accomplish and some ideas about how we plan to do that. Those wanting to improve your health, may have a new diet and exercise program that you plan to follow to help you reach your goals. If you’re wanting to deepen your relationship with Christ, maybe you have begun a new Bible reading plan or started a new devotional to try to do that. Next Saturday, the Session will be getting together for a day to think about the year ahead and to set goals and make plans.

Being intentional about setting goals and about taking steps toward achieving goals is a good way to get things done, but of course it isn’t fool proof. Just because we make plans or have a map doesn’t mean that things are going to unfold exactly how we thought it was going to, and this is one of those things about life that can be very frustrating and upsetting. Just think back to 2020. Whatever plans we

had at the beginning of that year were quickly disrupted by the end of March with the arrival of the pandemic. Hopefully we won't be contending with another pandemic anytime soon, but as we think about beginning another year, how do we begin with hope and optimism when we know that things could go off course at any given moment? Well, we find help today in the story about the visitors who followed the star that led them to Jesus. It is a story that gives us a picture of how the road we travel often is. It may be filled with uncertainty, and strange encounters, and unexpected detours, but we are never alone as we travel, and often it is in the unexpected twists and detours where we see God at work doing things greater than anything we would have planned or imagined.

Matthew is the only one of the Gospel writers to include the story of the magi, and their presence in the story is in and of itself a sign that is meant to point us to the truth that God's plans and purposes for the Messiah were even greater than what the people of Israel were expecting. They were expecting that God was going to send a king who would restore them as a nation, but the idea that this king would be the Savior for people like these Gentile visitors from the east went beyond their expectations. God's choice to reveal Jesus's birth and identity to these foreigners was a revelation and good news for those inside and outside of Israel who had eyes to perceive it.

Expectations are a strange thing. We naturally have them about things, but in my experience, my expectations rarely seem to match up with reality. Sometimes I try to prepare for this by setting low expectations. If I go into a movie expecting that it probably won't be that good, I often end up feeling like it was good, and the opposite also seems to be true. If I go into a movie with high expectations, I often come out thinking it wasn't that great. So many times, what I expect and reality don't match up, and that may be your experience also, but even though that's true, I still find that I want to cling to my expectations. I don't expect the unexpected. I expect the expected! Many in Israel were expecting the expected which made it difficult for

them to see and understand who Jesus was and what he had come to do, and it may be that there are times when we are so sure that God is going to do this thing or that thing for us, that we have a difficult time perceiving how God is truly moving or what God is really trying to do in us, or for us, or around us. When the magi saw the star that God set in the sky, they weren't bound by expectations about this king. Instead, they received the sign with open hearts and curiosity that compelled them to go look for the king. When we begin again, we are likely to begin with all of our expectations, and one of the ways that this story helps us to reframe our thinking as we begin again is by challenging us to begin with open hearts and curiosity. Rather than beginning with our own list of plans and our expectations about what we want God to do for us, we can begin instead by asking God to reveal what God's plans and intentions are for us in the coming days, and we can practice and exercise our faith muscle as we wait for the Lord and accept any uncertainty.

The wise men certainly experienced uncertainty in their journey to find Jesus. They didn't know for sure where the star was leading them. They used their knowledge and intuition that lead them to search for the king of the Jews in Jerusalem, and as we follow Jesus, it is right and wise to use our common sense, and knowledge, and to follow our intuition. The Spirit leads us in these ways, but often we are uncomfortable when every detail isn't clearly mapped out for us. We may feel uncertain or lost as we travel and most of us don't like to have those feelings, but it was ok that the magi didn't know exactly where they were going to end up when they started their journey, and it's ok when we don't, too. The important thing was that they kept following the star and they kept searching. As we pursue the things that God has in store for us, it's important that we also keep following the promptings, and the signs, and the leadings that God provides one step at a time, remembering as we do that we don't have to know exactly where are going to know that God is with us as we travel.

As the wise men followed the star and followed their intuition, they arrived in Jerusalem. It turned out that their journey didn't end there, but it was there that they met Herod who was jealous and paranoid and tried to influence them to come back with news about the baby king's location so that Herod could kill him. I sort of think that the wise men, being wise men, got a feeling about Herod when they met him, and that they might have suspected he was up to no good, but the text doesn't tell us if they did or didn't have any suspicions. What the text does tell us is that they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod so they returned home by another way. Here was another unexpected turn in their journey, another place where the road wasn't straight. It was a decision point when they had to decide whether to choose the familiar route home that they had already traveled or keep leaning into the unknown and embrace the change in plans.

I don't know how you feel about embracing changes in plans, but I know I don't always like it. In the same way that it can be hard to hold our expectations loosely, it can be hard to hold on to our plans loosely, too. When we encounter obstacles and interference, it's easy to see those things only in a negative light. Why would God allow this interference? Why is this door closing? Why does it seem like I'm being redirected away from something that seems good to me? Is God mad at me? Does God just want everything to be hard for me? It's not always easy to interpret obstacles or closed doors as God's intervention for good in our lives, but sometimes that may be exactly what it is. Sometimes God may be pointing us toward new possibilities that we wouldn't have moved toward on our own. Sometimes God may be giving us the opportunity to grow in ways that God knows we need to grow. Sometimes God may be inviting us to experience greater intimacy with God that grows as we trust or greater freedom and joy that come from leaving behind things that have been holding us captive. Kayla Craig says in her commentary, "As we go forth in faith, we'll have opportunities to decide between

conforming to external expectations and following God's path. Following the Spirit's stirrings may lead us down twists and turns that lead us out of our comfort zones but fit us into a divine path of truth, justice, and peace."

The words of the prophet Isaiah confirm the important truths that we find illustrated in the story of the magi. *I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.* As we think about how we will begin again at the start of a new year, this is the truth that we can carry with us, and it's the truth that gives us courage to begin with the same openness and curiosity and faith that enabled the wise men to perceive and receive what God had prepared for them. Inspired by the story of the Magi, we are encouraged and challenged today to begin the year with our hands open and ready to receive rather than clenched tight around the plans, and expectations, and goals that we have for ourselves.

To help us get into this open, trusting, and receptive frame of mind, we are going to have the opportunity to participate in a prayer practice today when we come to our Lord's table. In the bulletin there is a description included about this prayer practice and "star words." As it says in the description, this is a practice that is connected with Epiphany and the new year. The idea is that we each receive a word that we trust is a guiding word given to us by God that we can return to throughout the year in prayer and meditation. The word is a tool that can help focus our prayers and open our eyes to see things that God is doing in our lives that we might not have paid attention to or noticed otherwise. There is nothing magic about it. It is simply a gift to be received with a willingness to see, and trust, and follow the Spirit's movement in our lives.

As we come to the table, and receive a guiding word from the Lord, and begin again today, let us begin with this blessing written by Kayla Craig. "It's ok if your journey hasn't looked like you thought it would. As you navigate twist and turns, stay curious and open to where God might be leading. May you find the courage to explore new

routes and the wisdom to follow the One who will never leave you or forsake you. May each new path be a chance to trust God and discover deeper truths about the love that will never let you go.”
Amen.