

Sermon for Epiphany 2021

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A few years ago the Miller household took a road trip across the states to Florida and back. And while it provided an abundance of quality time in the car together, after the first five days of travel, I developed an intense loathing for one particular voice that interrupted, instructed, redirected and dominated much of our car time together...Siri. For those of you who may not have had the delight of being introduced to "Siri," she is the voice navigating system on cell phones. You enter your desired destination and Siri calculates what she considers the best route and then audibly dictates directions. Jason loves "Siri" and without hesitation follows her guidance wherever she leads. I, on the other hand, receive her instruction with great speculation. "Recalculating" seems to be her favorite phrase- a phrase she seems to use as a protective alternative for "oops, I goofed and now you are on a path to nowhere." You can actually watch on your cell phone as Siri leads the little cartoon image of your car off the highway into uncharted territory on google maps. I prefer more traditional travel guides, like the actual humans you can ask at the gas station, the road signs cemented along the journey, and my own eyes. I really did not enjoy following the guidance that came in this new form, especially as she lead us along new and unfamiliar roads.

This Thursday being Epiphany, today's scripture tells of the journey of the wise men. This week I read an article by writer David Hughes who reflecting on this text states, "Notice that this delegation of magi paid attention to and followed God's guidance however it came." However it came – in new and varied forms

First, they notice the appearance of a new star in the sky. This only happens because they were taking time to look. Their journey to the Savior, to receiving a word from God, begins with intentionally taking notice of a change in their surroundings, in the creation around them. They notice the new and are open to wondering what truth, what guidance this change offers. They then act on this potential sign from God. They leave the familiar, the security, their homes and travel to a foreign land believing they are being guided by this light in the sky. Would I receive the guiding light from a new star, a change in the sky? Would I even take notice or would I be too preoccupied watching my own feet on the ground?

As they travel, these wise men then humble themselves to receive further guidance. They stop and ask for directions from a powerful, foreign stranger. "Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod calls the chief priests and the scribes and they share the words of the prophets "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah...from you shall come a ruler." Following the guidance of these scriptures, delivered to them through the voice of a non-believer, the wise men continue. Do we seek to interpret scripture for guidance? Do we believe that the Word may come to us through God's ability to speak through strangers?

Finally, even after reaching their expected destination and worshipping the Christ child, the wise men continue to be open to guidance in whatever form God uses. Warned in a dream,

they return to their own country by another road. Star, strangers, scriptures, dreams – the many ways that God guides their journey along right paths. Are we attentive to how God is speaking and guiding – can we receive the witness of the Holy Spirit in new and unexpected forms?

And here is the crazy part – they didn't just follow the guidance that came through these varied forms along familiar roads to predetermined destinations. They followed even despite the "recalculating" and guidance into uncharted territory. And it is by off roading that they encounter Christ, that they are sent forth into new life in the good news.

Guidance is not always well received, especially in new, unfamiliar forms. The direction may interrupt, redirect and threaten to dominate our plans. Receiving God's guidance may mean letting go of our own preferred methods for determining our paths forward – it may require trust beyond what our eyes see or the traditional practices we have depended on. It may recalculate our plans and take us through uncharted territory, along new roads we have not traveled before.

Of course human nature receives such guidance with speculation...Can you imagine following a star, finding the truth of scripture spoken to you by a stranger, daring to follow the directions given to you in a dream?

And yet these are the ways God leads the wise men to the good news, to the experience of complete surrender, to overwhelming joy, to worship and new life in Christ.

Makes you wonder doesn't it... what signs do we fail to notice or do we too quickly dismiss? What changes around us hold guidance? What new forms, or new voices of revelation is God using with the hopes that we too will discover the good news of Christ, experience surrender and overwhelming joy, leading us to worship and new life?

Back to my love of Siri for a brief moment... the unexpected arrival of a hurricane striking landfall in Florida and charting a path up the coast meant a "recalculating" for our whole return trip home. While I still found Siri's mechanical voice grating and didn't fully trust we would end up in Minnesota, we were pretty dependent on her guidance when it became apparent our plans failed to take into account the unexpected and unknown. I appreciated her more and with each state boarder we crossed I let go of a little control and gained a little more trust.

We are dependent on God - on the guidance that leads us to Christ and new life in the good news. There are some moments this becomes more apparent than others. I believe we are experiencing such a moment as life around is being "recalculated" and we travel through uncharted territory on previously untraveled roads. May we learn to appreciate the direction God provides. May we seek stars, strangers, scripture and dreams. May we learn to trust.