

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
January 3, 2010  
Anita Rediger

### **“By Another Way...”**

Our visiting wise man leaves us with wistful words. He says, “I wish I knew...I wish I knew what had become of him, this little baby boy who seemed destined to grow up and become somebody...somebody who was to do something really important.”

Even though the years had passed busily, he hadn't ever been able to forget this experience, this encounter in Bethlehem. In Persia, nearly 35 years later, our scholar had no way of knowing that Jesus had grown up – both to *do* and to *be* “something really important.”

It wasn't only the wise man, whom upon seeing Mary's babe had had this sense. Do you remember Simeon, the aged Jew, righteous and devout, a man “looking forward to the consolation of Israel?” Simeon was no astrologer, but in his own way, he too, had been watching for a sign. Simeon wasn't guided by a star, yet the Gospel of Luke records, that “guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple.” And again, much to Mary & Joseph's surprise, and very much like the recent visitors from the East, Simeon took the infant Jesus into his arms and worshiped. Simeon proclaimed Jesus as the bearer of salvation... a light for revelation to the Gentiles. Now, that's somebody who's really important!

Speaking directly to Mary, Simeon said, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed...WHY opposed...because the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...” Luke 2:30ff

If only our visiting wise man had known how right he was about this little boy...

Even as an infant, Jesus was “somebody.” Even as a vulnerable baby, Jesus' presence stirred the mighty Herod to a violent response. Word of a newborn king revealed the dark inner thoughts of Herod; word of this child's birth brought light to a people whose lives were cloaked in thick darkness. – A certain recipe for unrest...

Let's go back to the very beginning words of this morning's reading: it was “in the time of Herod” that our wise man and his colleagues had traveled across great expanses of the Middle East –geography that we know as Iran, Iraq...Syria. All those years ago, they had arrived at the palace of a client king of the Roman Empire- the throne of an incredibly powerful man – and a man who desperately wanted to keep it that way! They arrived at the residence of Herod, known as “the Great!”

Our visiting wise man has just told us what they, as astrologers, had seen in the sky. They had seen -Jupiter - the star of the ruler of the universe – and Saturn -the star that controls the destiny of the nation of Palestine - aligning themselves with the constellation Aries –

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the ruler of the end times. To their Persian eyes, these signs in the heavens indicated that in Palestine, “a great king of the final days had been born.”

Our wise man and his colleagues had traveled across Arabia, watching the sky as much as the ground under their feet. How many sunsets did they see? Which colors in the sunrise were new to them as they neared the Mediterranean, the Great Sea? What kinds of flowers surprised them as they came out of the desert into the Jordan Valley? What strange little creatures scuttled by as their camels’ hooves struck the rocks?

The travelers were awestruck by the beauty of the natural world. They sensed the presence of a great cosmic power drawing them forward, leading them onward.

Attuned to the signs around them, the magi had set off toward Palestine. And just like us, on their quest for the Christ child, they filled in the gaps in their understandings with their cultural assumptions...A great king to be born in Palestine...hmm...to find such a king must certainly mean going to Jerusalem...once in Jerusalem one must seek out a king’s palace.

It must have been quite a surprise for the wise men to discover that Herod didn’t have any idea about the birth of such a king! It must have been quite a surprise for Herod to find himself host to these esteemed, oriental scholars and their unsettling questions! As far as Herod was concerned, there wasn’t any need for an infant king. Herod certainly wasn’t going to prepare a nursery for any such child! Just the opposite, Herod wasn’t reticent about killing anyone who might - even potentially - threaten his throne. Herod had demonstrated his depravity by drowning two of his young children and killing several wives and adult sons. “Just in case, you never know...they might get too power hungry!”

In Herod’s palace, our wise man had found himself on high alert. Something in the king’s response at their news of a newborn king oozed a sweetness that didn’t match the blanched color of his face and the way his hands worked the corners of his robe. These were the “days of Herod” alright. When Herod was troubled...everyone else was in trouble! Heads were sure to roll if Herod was unhappy! And it didn’t matter who you were!

The wise men spent the night in Jerusalem. The next day, following secretive meetings with a poker-faced Herod, they once again set out. They were unlikely experts – searching intently - but not quite knowing where to look... or what exactly they were looking for. They were puzzled by their strange reception in Jerusalem. Herod had given them some cryptic instructions referencing an ancient seer. It wasn’t much, but it was all they had to go on and they had been relieved to be on the journey again! The men were seasoned travelers and the days passed routinely. One day flowed into another when suddenly the star stopped! Stopped... “over the place where the child was born.”

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## Epiphany!!

Before they knew it, the well-regarded wise men found themselves on their knees before a young peasant woman and her baby boy. They were “overwhelmed with joy!” Even though *all* of it was so very unlikely, at this moment it had come together in a remarkable way. *It was a life-changing encounter. It was Epiphany!* Our wise man described the day like this, “There was something about that time together that had a sacred, spiritual quality to it. I don’t know how to put it into words, but we all felt it.” They spent the day...But now what???? ... Now, it was time to return home...

Our wise man hadn’t sleep well that night...the encounter of the day hadn’t been filled with theological discussions or political debate so it wasn’t that his mind was reliving the nuances of such cognitive challenges. No, the magi had simply been present to this poor, sojourning family – a family so much like any other family, with at the same time – an incredible holiness. Because of **this transformative** day – that night - everything was different. The world seemed altogether different. All of creation carried a different cast. After this encounter with the babe and his parents, there was no way that they could return to Herod. Herod’s desire to know of the baby’s whereabouts smacked of manipulation and innuendo. There was no way that he and his fellow travelers could return home by the way of Herod. *They had followed the star; they had found the child... and a great Light had shone upon them. Instead of returning again to the seats of empire-sanctioned power, a new way opened before them. It was a road which would lead into uncharted territory. It was another road altogether...*

Once, far, far away, in another time, a holy longing had been awakened within the wise men by the rising of a star. This holy longing now burned passionately within them. Yes, even after all these years, the tenderness and love of this holy encounter stirs within our wistful, wondering, wise man. We heard it in his words...

When I moved to Indiana – about 30 years ago -I marveled at the number of highways and state roads crisscrossing the state. Why, I could drive to Bluffton on SR 116 and then on to Decatur on SR 224! Or maybe I’d make a jaunt across on SR 124 to hit Monroe! I could continue homeward on Highway 27 or cut across at Berne on SR 218 before meeting up with a county road to bring the rest of the way home! My experience in western Nebraska had been much more straightforward: you came and went by the one road that there was...and you hoped it wasn’t too sandy or filled with ruts to make passage difficult!

In the part of the state that I grew up in – the far southwestern county - highways are a rare commodity. In this large county, mostly rangeland and fields – there are two highways – good ol’ Federal Highway 6, crossing from east to west into Colorado and

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State Highway 61 coming up out of Kansas and then going straight north through the Sandhills into South Dakota - every other road in the county is simply carved out of the natural sand or gravel.

When I hear the story of the wise men, “who left for their country by another road,” I think of my Indiana discovery of its many roads. These travelers from afar choose a different route when they headed homeward. They didn’t go through Jerusalem this time. They didn’t go through Jerusalem - on purpose!

One can only wonder what kind of roads they found for their journey into the East? One can only wonder who they encountered on these less traveled roads. Instead of more commonly traveled roads that had brought them downtown Jerusalem and then on to the hinterlands of Bethlehem, which way had opened for them? What sort of terrain had they encountered? What kind of people had caravanned alongside of them? Had they ever felt uncertain as to direction? Had they been injured or ill? Had they been stymied by impassable roadways? As they gathered around the fire as evening fell, did their conversation return again and again to this absolutely ironical odyssey? I wonder how they told others about this foray of faith... I’d really like to know!

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Monday morning in Alpenrose Place, our Swiss Village specialized dementia care area, we read this account of the wise men’s visit. I ended the reading just as Linda did this morning... recounting the words from the Gospel which say, and “they left for their own country by another road.” One of the women looked at me quizzically and stated matter-of-factly, “I wonder which way they went.” The tone of her simple question caught me off-guard... It carried the sense of “which way did they go, how did they get there and where are they now?!” Her words carried with them a query about *real roads* and *real life* –

The wise men really did have to travel home and it was “in the time of Herod.” Like them, we too, live in real time. How might we name our time? We might have called the first decade of this century “in the time of George Bush...” Perhaps, at the beginning of this New Year, we could begin our narrative, “in this time of global uncertainties.”

In this time of global uncertainties... there are roads for us to travel. Which ones entice us...and who is doing the inviting and why? Do we simply find ourselves “on the road” or have we been thoughtful about the choices available to us? Are we traveling via the superhighways leading to and through centers of political and military power or are we to be found on less popular backroads – the paths which meander through the lives of our planetary brothers and sisters? Have we asked ourselves...which roads lead toward life? Which ones leave others “in the dust?” How do we choose?

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The wise men saw signs in the heavens and set out to follow their leading. Their sojourn led them to the Christ Child and to a vision of a new future. We also have seen signs – signs of healing and hope in our individual lives, in the lives of others and in the life we share together... signs of welcome, signs of compassion, kindness, humility, signs of love... ERMF – looking back on 2009...ERMF -a sign in my life of God's epiphany!.. These are signs which announce the Kingdom among us... the way of Jesus...the Good News!

The wise men saw the star and believed that they were on the threshold of a new era. We stand on the threshold of a new year. May the story of the wise men – this most famous “Epiphany”- be a preview of all the epiphanies yet to come. May we choose to follow Jesus -God's greatest sign. May we follow expectantly, eagerly, courageously, the one who makes all things new... .. We are people of the Road! People of “another road.” And this journey is our home! AMEN

Words for Communion:

For you shall go out with joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills  
before you shall burst into song,

and all the trees of the field  
shall clap their hands...

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
Instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle...  
as an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

- Isaiah 55

Instead of bread... a stone...  
Instead of fish...a snake... - Matthew 7

Prayers:

Phyllis & Howard – now in the week following “round 2” of chemotherapy

Students & Teachers – returning to school tomorrow

College Students

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Youth Retreat - next weekend at Camp Friedenswald with Lynn Miller  
Joel, Derick & Alex

Birthdays-

Martin – on Wednesday

Blake - on Thursday

Fritz L. – on Friday : address in new directory

Gift of another year as Emmaus Road