

“Finding Your Way Home”
 Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
 Central Presbyterian Church
 January 15, 2012
 Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Rise up, follow me,
 Come away, is the call,
 With the love in your heart
 As the only song;
 There is no such beauty
 As where you belong;
 Rise up, follow me,
 I will lead you home.¹

Thank you Saint Paul composer Stephen Paulus for this beautiful anthem, and thank you to our choir. Let us begin with a prayer:

We come to church, mysterious God, unsure what to expect. Hoping to catch a glimpse of sheer beauty or gain a holy reminder that our mortality is tinged with transcendence, see a friend or receive a word of advice. We have somehow detected a call, and so again we wish to rise up and follow, and be led home. May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you, for you, O Lord, are our rock, our redeemer, and our way home. Amen.

How do you travel to where you need to be? Siri, where is home? When traveling, do you rely on your GPS device on your dashboard? Think about those letters for a moment – GPS - global positioning system, your very own personal space-based satellite navigation system? Even the Jetsons did not imagine GPS! (The things we take for granted these days.) Or are you at the opposite end of the spectrum, avoiding technology and relying only upon instinct? I am still a fan of mapquest. Until recently, mapquest was reliable but rigid. (A new feature allows you to change the route). You want to get from point A to point B? Here is the quickest and most obvious route, with exact mileage marked.

Diana Butler Bass is doing some wonderful work thinking about and writing for churches like ours, what some call the mainline churches. She writes about how reliant we have become on technology and things like mapquest. She writes,

When Jesus said “Follow me,” he did not say “Follow the map.” Rather, he invited people to follow him, to walk with him on a pilgrimage toward God. . . How do we follow the Jesus way? [she asks] You have to exit the highway, risk getting lost, and

¹ Stephen Paulus, The Road Home

follow the signposts on the ground.²

I think about those magi, those mystical religious figures from the east that are featured briefly but so prominently in the gospel of Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. Astrologers more than kings, these wise ones followed a star, searching for a baby born to be king. They did not have a destination point in mind, only a confidence that they would know they were there when they arrived. They had no maps with a route drawn, no directions. Their assignment was to wander following the leading of a star and then report back to Herod.

You likely have heard and know the answer to this joke. Do you know what would have happened if it had been 3 wise women instead of 3 wise men? They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, and brought food and practical gifts.

That is not how the gospel narrates the story. Sent by jealous and powerful King Herod to locate this baby born to be king of the Jews, they wander until they find him. And something happens while they are there. The story we do have is both enchanting and stingy with details. "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy" (Matthew 2:10). Why were they overwhelmed with joy? They had not seen Jesus yet. Was there such an overwhelming aura around the house that they felt joy? Their heightened anticipation turned to joy? Or were they filled with joy because their journey was over? The gospel gives no reason but then uses six action verbs in the next verse. "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh" (Matthew 2:10-11).

Entering, seeing, kneeling, paying homage, opening treasures, offering gifts. Lots of actions, but I still want to know whether they were allowed to hold the baby. And how old was Jesus by the time they arrived? Did they babysit and allow Mary and Joseph a bit of time away? Did they see Jesus smile? Did they look deep into the eyes of this baby and somehow see all the way to God?

Did something happen while they were there to make them fall in love with goodness again? Did something in their encounter with Jesus give them hope and make them suspicious of the political games of the powerful? Did something happen that changed them from being spies for Herod to protectors of Jesus? Or was it only a dream that changed their return plans? The last we hear of the wise men is that they obeyed the warning of the dream, and left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:12). They had to find their way home in a way that would avoid the paranoid and powerful Herod.

Babies have a way of changing people, or changing their goals and directions, of instilling a fierce sense of protection.

² Diana Butler Bass, Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 71-73.

I hope to never forget the car ride in which we took Amaya home from the hospital after her birth. The same route I had taken hundreds of times before, and have taken hundreds of time since. But this time on I was hyper alert. Wondering if we had the car seat correctly installed. As we exited the freeway, I worried that the car behind was following too closely and angry that that driver would dare jeopardize our car, our young cargo. Going up the hill on St Clair Avenue, passing Snelling and (I still cannot believe I did this) pointing and either stupidly or prophetically saying “that is where you will go to school.” My finger was vague enough that I could have been referring to my college alma mater, or to the Macalester-Plymouth preschool that she has indeed attended. The distinction for parents between being protective and controlling can be difficult to maintain!

Babies have a way of bringing out the best in a church. In the case of Trygve and Jack, we here at Central have known about the dreams of their parents, their desires to parent long before Tryg and Jack were even conceived. We have been a community that offered, I hope, appropriate support and prayers throughout those long months and years of waiting. And now we are so excited to celebrate with you. We take seriously the promises we will make today as a congregation, to help in the nurturing of children, to teach children about God and goodness, to serve as mentors and trustworthy people who can help, and hold.

Babies have a way of changing us, and changing the subject. In this span of the last ten days, we have experienced a lot of death in this congregation. People who have guided and influenced this congregation. For those of us who knew Chuck and Marlys and Eileen and David, our hearts are both heavy and grateful. Sad, but grateful for memories, and the example of these people, and their distinctive quirks that bring smiles to our faces. This week has been a reminder of the unique qualities in each person and how we can play a small but unique part in a larger story of God’s love.

Friday, Marilyn Freier - having just had to hear and then share the news they were not hoping to get with Herb, that his surgery went fine but the cancer had returned – Marilyn changed the topic as I was leaving the room and expressed joy about today’s baptism (and how she wished she could be here to celebrate). Babies have a way of reminding us of life’s fragility and goodness and giving us hope.

What I would give to see Jesus as a child. To enter the house with the wise men and see Jesus and offer gifts. I don’t get to do that. But I will get to look into the face of Trygve, and here at Central we all get to see up close so many children. To surround them with love and encouragement, to support them and their families with our prayers, to teach them and more importantly, be taught by them about God and wonder and beauty and mystery. And then we go home.

They went home, the gospel says, a different way. They went home, changed and wiser, having met Jesus. They went home a different way – committed now to protecting the child, to being faithful to God, to be part of a wonderful story. May it be so for us as well. Amen.

