

Home by Another Way

Isaiah 60:1 "Arise, shine; for your light has come, And the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

2 "For behold, darkness will cover the earth And deep darkness the peoples; But the LORD will rise upon you And His glory will appear upon you.

3 "Nations will come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising.

4 "Lift up your eyes round about and see; They all gather together, they come to you. Your sons will come from afar, And your daughters will be carried in the arms.

5 "Then you will see and be radiant, And your heart will thrill and rejoice; Because the abundance of the sea will be turned to you, The wealth of the nations will come to you.

6 "A multitude of camels will cover you, The young camels of Midian and Ephah; All those from Sheba will come; They will bring gold and frankincense, And will bear good news of the praises of the LORD.

7 "All the flocks of Kedar will be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth will minister to you; They will go up with acceptance on My altar, And I shall glorify My glorious house.

8 "Who are these who fly like a cloud And like the doves to their lattices?

9 "Surely the coastlands will wait for Me; And the ships of Tarshish *will come* first, To bring your sons from afar, Their silver and their gold with them, For the name of the LORD your God, And for the Holy One of Israel because He has glorified you.

Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,

2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard *this*, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

6 'AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found *Him*, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."

9 After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over *the place* where the Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

11 After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 And having been warned *by God* in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.

Loving Creator shine as a light before me that you may be seen and not I.
Give me words that I may speak give us ears that we may hear, and through
your Holy Spirit help us understand.
Amen.

I want to tell you all that with the writers strike dragging on I am now having to write my own sermons.

Those magic men the magi
Some people call them wise
Or oriental, even kings
Well anyway, those guys
They visited with Jesus
They sure enjoyed their stay
Then warned in a dream of king Herod's scheme
They went home by another way.

These words are from James Taylor's song Home by another way.
He poetically recounts the visit of the Magi.

The Magi arrived in Judea with the hopes of finding the messiah, the new king.
They probably figured that this king, announced in the heavens, would be welcomed and lauded by his own people, after, all he was to be king of kings.

When they arrived they met Herod. As I said last week, Herod was great. Everything that Herod did was great. He built great, he ruled great, he acted great. He was great in all kinds of ways. What the Magi learned was that Herod was a great danger.
Herod was a great paranoid, and a great power hungry game player.

The Magi were warned in a dream to leave by another way.
Did you ever begin down one road with a particular destination in mind only to find another way?

I want to tell a story about a real person. This is kind of a Rest of the Story story.
It may take a bit to get back but stay with me.

It is the story of Vincent Furnier . He came from a decent church going middle of the road family. He was a sickly kid and his parents moved to Phoenix for his health.

When he was in high school in Phoenix he and some friends formed a band. They were theatrical rock and rollers. Vincent put on horror style make up and performed music that spoke to rebellious youth.

Because they endorsed the reckless abandon of adolescent angst, they became very popular. They encouraged rowdy drunken promiscuous behavior and participated as well.

Vincent eventually changed his name legally to the name of their band Alice Cooper.

As Alice Cooper, Vincent was playing a part, a role; he was not truly himself. He did lose himself to the part, but it was always a part even when the part seemed to be playing him. He says that as he did all these things, he did believe in God; he never felt that was a question. He just did not give God all that much thought. He was just earning a living.

In the main stream of society, Alice Cooper was viewed with suspicion. This guy with the make up and weird songs must be dangerous. And he would say now that much of what he did was dangerous.

See, Alice Cooper was self destructing. Drugs and alcohol abuse had him on the verge of losing his marriage, and, as he was watching his life unravel, he found something greater than himself, he found God.

Today Alice Cooper still plays his part as a rock star, but he no longer performs songs that he feels have a negative message. He does not go around as a Christian celebrity, because as he says, "I'm a rock singer. I'm nothing more than that. I consider myself low on the totem pole of knowledgeable Christians. So, don't look for answers from me."

He began his journey going one direction. He was there for stardom, and wealth and pleasure. He thought those things would make him happy.

Fortunately when God called to him, whether in a dream or some other way, he listened.

God called to him and said he needed to turn and go a new direction. Because of this change in his life he has a life worth living.

Throughout these seasons of Advent and Christmas we hear of people warned in dreams.

God warned the Magi.

When Herod was going to slaughter the innocents, God warned Joseph. Mary and Elizabeth both had warnings of a sort, more like calls.

I think that we hear the stories of Mary and Joseph, of Elizabeth and of the Magi and think, yea sure, but that was way back then and this is now, God doesn't speak to people today, and if God did it wouldn't be to me.

The thing is that that is just our heads talking.

Remember our United Church of Christ Slogan -- God is still speaking. God is always there calling to us, as God was calling Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth and the Magi and to others as well.

Stories of redemption go on and on. John Newton slave trader turned pastor, turned his life around and went home another way.

Paul the Apostle is the consummate example of the person who turned around and changed his whole life. The man who was persecuting Christians becomes its greatest spokesperson.

We know these big stories and others and we may think that only the big stories are worthy.

But what of my biker gang friend Joe who went from prisoner at Attica to pastor.

How about another friend Donna, who, as a single mom of 3 boys, felt she needed to make a change. She had a difficult time with men and her life was not at all settled. She began bringing her boys to church and she found something at the church, something she had been missing.

Her sons found friends and so did Donna.

They attended activities and services and became part of the church community.

When Donna had a rare blood disorder, people from the church made sure she had what she needed.

She began teaching Sunday school after a little while and eventually served on committees as she found a passion for this church and for her faith; she found a new life. Her boys have grown into fine young men, in large part because Donna listened to God's call.

This story, while not as dramatic as the Magi story, is still a story of God calling, of God still speaking. Every one of us gets that call, or calls. Many people need repeated messages and even with that, some people never hear.

I don't think that it is strange that the Magi got a message from God whether in a dream or not, what I think makes the story is that they hear and listen.

How would history have been different if the Magi had returned to Herod and told him where the child was? But the Magi listened and changed their plans, their itinerary.

That can be hard for some people, once they have made a plan that is that. If the Magi had stuck to their original plan and ignored God, well who knows?

Being willing to turn a new direction can be intimidating and a bit frightening. Change is difficult.

Humans generally want to avoid changing.

But when we get to the manger and find the babe, when we discover that God is right here with us, when we have seen the light we must go new directions and be willing to change course at God's calling.

God is calling for us to follow our path.
Don't go back to Herod, find a new road back to your home.

This is the reality of God- new paths and possibilities.
The Magi went a new way after their dream.

Paul's eyes were opened and he saw a whole new life before him.
Donna found a new life in a simple choice to make her faith a living one.

Alice Cooper said in an interview

"I was one thing at one time, and I'm something new. I'm a new creature now. Don't judge Alice by what he used to be. Praise God for what I am now."

The Magi came and saw the miracle, they honored the child with their gifts
and they were transformed and sent off on a whole new direction.

I close with more words from James Taylor's song:

Steer clear of royal welcomes
Avoid a big to-do
A king who would slaughter the innocents
Will not cut a deal for you
He really, really wants those presents
He'll comb your camel's fur
Until his boys announce they've found trace amounts
Of your frankincense, gold and myrrh

Yes they went home by another way
Home by another way
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too
And go home by another way.

Thanks be to God.
AMEN.