

“Home by Another Road”
Matthew 2:1-12
Rev. Andrew Connors
Celebration of the Day of Epiphany
January 9, 2022

We're back online and I'm sure I'm not the only one who feels weary of all the whipsawing! The decision to go online - like so many decisions the church has made through covid - was not clear cut by any means. We desperately need to gather together. So many in our community are craving personal human connection. Our mental and spiritual health must be considered not just our susceptibility to physical disease. And, the good news about this particular variant is that if you're vaccinated & boosted you are not likely to face the prospect of death or serious illness. Those who have to be hospitalized are likely to require things like oxygen support, not the more serious medical interventions related to disease of the lungs. And the surge is moving fast. I'm optimistic though not certain that 2 weeks from today we'll be back in hybrid fashion. That's the good news.

The bad news is that our hospitals are in crisis and are short staffed due to illness which has struck so many in this highly contagious variant. And while the hospital beds aren't yet full they could be soon. Our Return to Brown Committee felt the church's responsibility not only to keep our own members safe, but to do what we can to cut down on transmission of the disease in solidarity with the nurses, doctors, and other health care workers whose tireless efforts go unseen by most, protecting the viability of the hospitals for those who do need to be there whether from covid or something else.¹

So here we are again - another unanticipated change of plans. It's the experience that so many of you have had recently on a more personal level - a flight cancelled because the crew was sick or because you tested positive. A Christmas family event cancelled because someone got sick. Waiting in a long line for a test or searching for one for days unsure of whether you should go out into the world or not. Expectations dashed and not one time - but countless times over these last nearly two years in a way that shakes our foundations.

I wonder if the Magi ever got acclimated to their changed expectations. It happened to them more than once. They first came to *Jerusalem* expecting to find a king. Jerusalem - the city of power. But they were wrong. "In Bethlehem" - that's where you will find him, they were told. Change of plans. Once there, they had planned to head home in the same way that they came. But they were warned in a dream to stay away from Herod so they went home by another road. Another change of plans. And

¹ One of the best places for current coronavirus information is *The New York Times*. This has been especially true since December when a computer hack took down Maryland's official website for information. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>

these are only the changes reported by the story. Some say it took the magi three years to find the king. Who knows what stops and starts they encountered. Were they thrown off by these changes or had they planned for them? We'll never know. All we know is that these changes did not rob them of their joy. The text says that when they found the child and his mother they were "overwhelmed with joy." The Greek says it in four words – literally "they rejoiced greatly a great joy." They were present to the joy when they found it for the amount of time that it seemed to last. They weren't lost in the weariness of their traveling past, nor overly focused on the anxiety of their future. They were present to the reality of this child before them.

We desperately need to learn their secret - how to be present to great joy when all of your expectations are thrown out of whack. The mystics and other sages have long recognized that some of the hardest spiritual work is learning how to live in the present. To accept what is actually happening now rather than staying mired in the past, or arrested by the anxiety of what could happen in the future. "Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future," said the Buddha, "concentrate the mind on the present moment."² "We spend precious hours fearing the inevitable," Maya Angelou wrote. "It would be wise to use that time adoring our families, cherishing our friends and living our lives."³

You might think that those who are worried about the planet or our dying city, or the state of our fragile democracy would look at this kind of focus on the present as a reckless denial of our situation. Three days after the Jan. 6 anniversary, with our democracy in as precarious a situation as ever, how can we not mourn the past? With Baltimore city losing 1,000 homes a year to abandonment, with no answers for the violence, shedding families each year continuing to fuel our decline, how can we not anticipate troubles? With forests on fire each year, floods and storms on the rise, how does living in the present moment lead us to action?

Well, some of those who care deeply about our planet and our nation's future are arguing in the words of one journalist that we need to "dig ourselves out of nostalgia and face the world as it exists."

"We have this idea that the world is either normal and in continuity with what we've expected, or it's the apocalypse, it's the end of everything — and neither are true," said Alex Steffen, a climate futurist who thinks that part of our apocalyptic doomsdaying it making it harder to change our future, not easier. "If you can wake up and go to work in the morning," he told the *New York Times*, "you're not in an apocalypse."⁴ Steffen had me thinking this week as I double-masked and went to the grocery store, woke up each morning and logged into email, made phone calls,

² *The Teaching of Buddha: The Buddhist Bible : A Compendium of Many Scriptures Translated from the Japanese*, (Japan: The Federation of All Young Buddhist Associations of Japan), 1934.

³ <https://wisdomquotes.com/maya-angelou-quotes/>

⁴ Elizabeth Weil, "This Isn't the California I Married," *The New York Times Magazine*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/03/magazine/california-wildfires.html?>

attended zoom meetings for work and volunteer activities. He had me considering my own reality as I celebrated with my daughter her last college application completed on time. Even leading church this morning from a living room instead of a sanctuary. It's true we are not in an apocalypse. It's also still true that we are in a weird, maddening mess.

Steffen calls our situation "trans-apocalyptic." We're in the middle of multiple crises and we need to learn to live "native to now." It's a period of discontinuity which according to Steffen is "a moment where the experience and expertise you've built up over time cease to work. It is extremely stressful, emotionally, to go through a process of understanding the world as we thought it was, is no longer there," he says. "There's real grief and loss. There's the shock that comes with recognizing that you are unprepared for what has already happened."⁵

"Most of us have dragged our feet and deluded ourselves for too long about the state of the world," writes the reporter who interviewed Steffen, Elizabeth Weil. "While we remain stuck, our world pulled away from our understanding of it. We've now fallen into a gap in our apprehension of reality. We need to acknowledge this, size up the rupture, then hurl ourselves over the breach."

I had hoped to scour the article for how we could do that, particularly those of us who do feel stuck, who are grieving past realities, or who are fearing the future. When I didn't find what I was looking for I went back to the text to find the same thing. And I did find something - the magi do seem to adapt to new realities. Though outside of Israel's borders - religious and geographic they come to find the one they believe has brought great joy for them as well. This is part of what we celebrate at Epiphany - the gathering of those beyond Jewish borders to be included in God's great salvific plan as predicted by the Jewish prophetic tradition. Those magi made constant adjustments, allowed themselves to be tossed by shifting waves, floating with the changes instead of holding tight the anchors that needed to change.

But what impressed me more was God's own movement, God's ability to shift and change with each new roadblock thrown in place by human folly and error. The countless times throughout the history of the people of God, that God has to face the reality of human beings who fail to fulfill God's expectations, who don't live up to God's hopes much less their own. God's willingness to face that reality and to try something new and radically different in this eternal pursuit of love and justice, God's eternal hope for human beings. A God who uses tricksters and harlots and Hebrew slaves raised in Pharaoh's house to bring about liberation. A God who dances to the hymns of female poets and shepherd boys recruited to bring down giants in their own times. It is God's ability to roll with the waves and adjust her response by holding dear her own dreams especially when her methods for securing them, for realizing them fall apart. This imaginative flexibility of God is the basis of our hope, the source of our life, the very

⁵ Ibid.

thing that gives us the ability in the face of all that is going wrong to see God at work in our world. The magi find a way home because God leads them to consider it.

It could be the very thing that this pandemic is trying to cultivate within us. The ability to shift and change more than we thought we could, more than we would have on our own. The ability to adjust to the realities before us with more creative possibilities than we imagined in the past, not because it is fun or better, but because it is what is necessary in the days to come when the past is past and we have to find other ways to find our way home. For joy can be found in many places. And justice can be achieved in more than one way. And we need to become as imaginative and God in our searching.

There was plenty to celebrate about 2021 for those who had eyes to see. I'm serious. The total number of incarcerated people in the US fell by 13% from 2010-2020. That's good news! Sweden delivered the world's first batch of steel produced without fossil fuels and it could be on the mass market within 5 years. 41 women topped the new Fortune 500 list more than any other time in the six decades that the list has been published. The Netherlands is making all of its train stations accessible to its 320,000 visually impaired citizens. India pledged to get half of its energy from renewable sources by 2030 and achieve net-zero emissions by 2070.⁶ And BUILD and its partners delivered over 3 million meals to people who would have gone without food without public private partnerships.

Please don't mishear me. We are in bad shape - in Baltimore, in the country, in the world. Our future is as volatile as ever. Things are not better. They are worse. It's just that our faith teaches that those are precisely the times when God is active within us and sometimes in spite of us. Adapting to the present with new ways of bringing about the same hopes, the same dreams that God held for our ancestors and continues to hold for us. The dream of a just and peaceful world for those from east and west and north and south. Who despite their dashed expectations receive enough light from the heavens, enough whispers from their dreams to find their way to joy - rejoicing greatly a great joy together.

⁶ "The Year in Cheer: 192 Ways the World Got Better in 2021," <https://reasonstobecheerful.world/the-year-in-cheer-2/>