

A Different Way

January 6, 2008

(The Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ - Year A)

Matthew 2: 1-12

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

My grandfather on my mother's side, who I called Grandad, loved to take car trips.

Even though Grandad lived in the city, he loved to take car trips out into the country in his big, Texas-sized Cadillac.

I loved to ride in the car with my Grandad, too.

And, even when we were just going out to his ranch just outside of Houston, he would tell me one of his rules of the road.

Grandad would always say:

“When you are out on a trip, don't go back the same way that you came. Always go back a different way, then you'll get to see something new.”

I never realized how much I have heeded my Grandad's advice until I started to think about it.

His voice has rung in my head all these years.

“Boy, when you travel, always go back - a different way.”

My Grandad's advice on how to make a journey has become a part of me.

And, when I think about how I come to work every day here at St. Alban's, I always travel straight up Highway 84 from Woodway, straight up Waco Drive here to the church.

But when I come home, I always go back a different way, going down 30th Street to Franklin Avenue, then going down Franklin until it merges with Highway 84.

The wise men from today's Gospel story never knew my Grandad,
Yet the wise men chose to go back from Bethlehem - a different way.

In the Gospel story of the Epiphany of Jesus Christ, wise men from the East see a star at its rising, and they follow this star to Jerusalem.

These magi or kings or wise men believe that the star is announcing that a new King of the Jews has been born.

However, King Herod, the real King of the Jews at the time, becomes jealous and uneasy about this news.

He deviously instructs the wise men to report back to him as to the location of this new king.

The wise men then follow the star to Bethlehem, to the house where Jesus is.

The wise men kneel down and worship Jesus, offering gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Yet, disobeying King Herod's orders, they decide not to go back the same way that they had come.

The wise men go back to their own country - a different way.

You see, after we have seen the Son of God lying in a manger,
After we have knelt down and offered him gifts,
After we have experienced this great Epiphany,
After we are changed and transformed by Jesus Christ,
Then we cannot go back the same way that we came.
We *must* travel by a *different* way.

Some people will say that the wise men traveled to Jerusalem from Persia, from what is now Iraq or Iran.

And the wise men, I bet, were pretty smart guys.

And I bet that they were smart enough to follow the star by traveling to Jerusalem on the smooth and direct interstate highways, where they could go 70 miles per hour on their camels.

Yet, after they were transformed by their epiphany at Bethlehem, the wise men went back to their own country by another way.

They traveled back on bumpy, ranch roads with potholes and roadside BBQ stands.

They traveled on winding, country roads with big, live oak trees to picnic under.

The wise men made the odd choice not to travel back down the interstate,

But they chose the hard, slow and rough roads back home.

The Christian faith and life is not an easy journey.
The Christian faith and life is bumpy and winding and odd.

At our Baptism, we make a choice not to return to our old way of life.
We make the choice to go home to God - but by a different way.
We make the odd choice to make the way of the Cross, the way of suffering and sacrifice, into our new way of life.

The more and more that I live this Christian life, the more I realize what an odd religion this really is.
And the more and more I live this Christian life within the community of God's Episcopal Church, the more I realize what an odd little bunch of folks that we are.

I tend to think that Waco, Texas, is a largely Christian city.
I tend to think that most of the people I encounter here walk the same road that I walk on.

Yet, as I drove home from work last week, during the Christmas Season, I noticed that all of the houses in Waco were dark.

When I turned onto my street, I saw that my house was the only one in our neighborhood that had Christmas lights on during the Christmas Season.

As a life-long Episcopalian, it puzzles me why folks would put up Christmas lights in mid-November, yet take them down during Christmas.

And so, I must assume that my neighbors must think that I am either lazy or crazy - or both.

Yet, upon further reflection, it doesn't bother me a bit to celebrate Christmas for 12 days.

In fact, I am glad to be a part of the Episcopal Church, a church that goes home by an odd and different road.

Last week, Julia Hardie, the director of the Central Texas String Academy, told me a story.

She told me that when the strings students played here on All Saints'

Sunday last November that, for a few of her students, it was the first time they had ever been to a worship service in a church.

After the students had played here during that wonderful worship service on that Sunday, one of the instructors asked the students if they had any questions about what they had experienced here in worship.

One of the girls, who has not been raised as a Christian, replied:

“Well, I pretty much understood everything.

But what I *couldn't* figure out

Was why that guy who kept talking was wearing a white bath robe with a rope around his waist.”

I love this odd and different church,

Because it is an odd and different way that we have decided to take home.

A different way, where ministers wear bathrobes and ropes.

A different way, where a little bunch of folks leave their Christmas lights on during Christmas.

A different way, where the wise men and my Grandad and all baptized Christians choose to go home - by a different way.

In 2008, how will you decide to go home?

Will you go back to your old ways, cruising down the interstate highway back to King Herod?

Or, will you choose a different way?

A different way of prayer, of kindness, of love, of sacrifice, of suffering, of bumpy and odd roads that the wise men chose.

Because the voice of my Grandad, who was a wise man, still speaks in my heart:

“Boy, when you travel,

Always go back - a different way.”

AMEN.

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