

1-5-25 Sermon: “The Road Isn’t Straight” – Matthew 2:1-12

Once upon a time – and oh, what a time it was! – I used to drive in a straight line to get to church.

I live up in El Prado, so I do have make a few turns to make my way to the Old Blinking Light. But once I got there, it was always a straight shot in.

But *that* was in a pre-construction era.

These days, I travel a much more circuitous route to church.

Some days, I still go south on Paseo, but I have to take that lovely detour onto Camino de la Placita, where somehow they have *altered* the space-time continuum so that half a mile of traffic can take ten to fifteen minutes to drive!

Other days, when I don’t feel like spending my one wild and precious life sitting in traffic, I go the other way. I wind up Lower Colonias to Blueberry Hill, then cut down on Cottom – except OOF, those speed humps! Then I take Lower Ranchitos into town, turn *left* on Camino de la Placita (not nearly as much traffic going *that* way!), then right on Civic Plaza Drive, and over to the church.

And *then*, there are the days when I start off going south on Paseo, but I second guess my choice because the traffic starts backing up at Hail Creek, so I sneak off onto Upper Ranchitos, go left at the fork with Millicent Rogers, take it all the way back along the Rio to the other side of town, where it hits Lower Ranchitos, then drive *that* back up into town to Placita, Civic Plaza, Paseo – and ta-da! I’ve arrived at the church!

Now, it’s true: By this point I’ve driven much further and taken much *longer* to get to work than if I’d just waited in the traffic on the Placita detour. But I’m also feeling significantly less *murderous* than if I do on Placitas...so I count it as a win.

Today, we celebrate Epiphany. And today marks the last Sunday of our Advent-Christmas series, “Words for the Beginning,” during which we’ve spent time examining some fundamental but often unspoken truths of our faith.

And today’s words for the beginning are especially appropriate for this moment in Taos, New Mexico; today’s words are: “The Road Isn’t Straight.”

We encounter this unspoken truth in today’s gospel reading: the story of the wise men. And the wise men are good folks for us to talk to when we encounter roads that aren’t straight, because these wise men are quintessential wanderers.

Matthew tells us very little about the wise men. He does not tell us that they are kings. He does not even tell us that there are three of them. We meet these travelers midway through their journey; we learn about them the same way King Herod does – when three strangers from the East show up in Jerusalem asking, “Where is the child born king of the Jews? We have seen his star, and we’ve come to pay him homage.”

These men are foreigners; they are Gentiles. They are not Jews, and they do not worship Israel’s God. They are the *wrong people* to go looking for the Christ child – they don’t even believe in all that stuff! These guys are astrologers, perhaps Zoroastrian priests from Persia. They have followed a star because *that* is their religious language, their custom – none of this business with Scripture, and prophecies, and a Messiah who is to be born in Bethlehem.

By the time we meet the wise men, they are *way* out of their comfort zone. In fact, I kind of wish Matthew had captured the scene right *before* the wise men entered Herod’s palace to ask for directions. I imagine Balthasar going off on a rant: “Melchior, do you realize where this wild goose chase – or wild *star* chase – of yours has taken us?! We are all the way over in *Israel*!”

This whole star thing was supposed to be a little detour, not an international expedition! Next thing I know, you're going to be telling me to take a right on Upper Ranchitos!"

The wise men had no business being in Jerusalem, seeking out the child born King of the Jews. But they recognized God when God showed up. They saw the light from the star, and they knew that it was something holy. So they set off, not knowing where they were going. They allowed their lives to be interrupted, let themselves be led off the straight and narrow. When God was revealed and began to lead them, they followed.

The road isn't straight. Friends, this is true in our lives as well, isn't it?

When I look back on my life thus far, some pieces follow the straight and narrow, here and here. But other parts look about as circuitous and convoluted as my current commute to church! Going the wrong way to go the right way, second-guessing the road I'm on, getting stuck in stop and go... I don't know what it is that the Holy Spirit has against efficiency, but whenever she is leading us, the path is never linear.

Perhaps you've had periods like that, too. Disruptions and detours on your journey of life. A diagnosis, a death, a divorce. A loss, a betrayal, an accident – heartbreaks or traumas that bring us to the floor. As individuals, as communities, as a nation... sometimes we think we are going in the right direction, and then the whole rug gets pulled out from under us. And we are left grasping at straws, trying to put the pieces back together. Time may be linear, friends, but life is *not*, this we know full well.

The road isn't straight – never was, never will be. But the promise of the Gospel is that God will show up and meet us on that road. When that road is joyful, and when it is full of sorrow. Whether it's the path God hoped we would travel, or one that we stubbornly took on our own. Even when our journey takes us through hell itself – "Yea, though I walk through the valley, even of the *shadow of death*, thou art with me. Thy rod and they staff, they comfort me."

The good news of Epiphany is that God shows up. God reveals Godself. In stars in the sky, in wandering Persians, in Jewish babies, and unwed mothers. In unexpected places and unlikely people. Even when we're going in the absolute wrong direction. Even...when we turn on Upper Ranchitos.

God shows up. That's the promise. Our job is to recognize God's presence in our midst, and to be willing to follow when God says, "Come."

At the end of the story, the wise men are warned in dream not to return to Herod, so they leave for their own country by another road. Another road. Imagine that. God won't even let them go home a way that might be somewhat familiar. They've met and worshipped the Christ child, and yet their wandering is only halfway done.

Their road isn't straight. But wise men – and women, and people – have learned that to follow God's lead is to wander. May we have the faith to do the same. Amen.