

Primary Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Just after my junior year of college, I was privileged to travel for a month abroad. The theme of the trip was Christian pilgrimage sites. And so we spent time in the Holy Land, Italy, and Spain. And one of the most pleasant surprises was a pilgrimage to a city in northwestern Spain called Santiago de Compostela.

I didn't know anything about this city before my trip, but it has a huge church there in honor of the Apostle James (*Santiago* means "St. James" in Spanish). And in medieval times, this church was actually one of the three most visited destinations by pilgrims along with the Holy Land and Rome.

We as North Americans aren't as familiar with this practice of pilgrimage, but it's a growing practice among Christians these days. It's often noted how European churches are experiencing an incredible decline in both worship attendance and membership. But there's been quite a resurgence in pilgrims with tens of thousands annually walking the 500-mile-*Camino* or "way" to this church in Santiago de Compostela.

The group of which I was a part *didn't* walk the 500 miles to northwestern Spain, we landed late one night in the city's small airport followed by a taxi ride to our motel. The next morning we walked from our motel the approximately half-mile or so to tour this church which had been built almost a thousand years before.

Once inside this church I soon found myself elbow-to-elbow with throngs of pilgrims many who literally had walked months to reach this destination. And it struck me as I saw many of the pilgrims with their walking sticks, some with ankles taped, others with skin well tanned from their long journey... it struck me how privileged I was to be at this place and yet, at the same time, I couldn't help wondering if the other pilgrims appreciated it much more. This destination after all which took others months, took me just a few hours' flight to get to.

Our Gospel story for today relates a journey as well as a destination. Wise men or *Magi* – traditionally assumed to be just three because of the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh... We might think of these Magi as the earliest Christian Pilgrims, at least according to Matthew's Gospel.

In the Christmas story from Luke's gospel the first pilgrims to visit the Christ child are shepherds – they have a short journey but are severely lacking privilege or power... In Matthew's story, the first pilgrims have an incredibly long journey, but are people who come from privilege and power.

It's a bit like two different perspectives, two different road maps, two different pilgrimages with the same destination. In one the physical journey is short, but the distance from privilege and power is great. In the other, the pilgrims are located rather close to the center of power and privilege, but the physical journey is long and arduous.

And the first place the Magi look for this King of the Judeans is the obvious center of power and privilege – the city of Jerusalem – where they meet a person at the center of power and privilege, King Herod. And here there is temptation.

Herod sends them to the poor, rural village of Bethlehem under the pretense of finding a Christ child, supposedly so he might also pay homage. We who know the story and have heard last weeks reading in which Herod uses genocide to kill all the children around Bethlehem under two, know of Herod's real motivation – *to preserve his power and privilege as king*.

But I wonder if the Magi were taken for awhile by this scheme. I wonder if the Magi were seduced for a time by power and privilege.

I know I've often been seduced by it. Living in probably the most powerful and privileged country in the world, I've been seduced to think that if you don't have a PhD or a job title or at least a respectable job or U.S. citizenship or a heterosexual disposition or the same shade of skin or a name which I can easily pronounce or... the list goes on and on doesn't it?

I've been seduced by the powers and privileges that come with living and growing up where I have and where I do. Power and privilege can be intoxicating after all. It's like a road map telling you where to find meaning. Solid answers, wealth, these are tempting things to be searching for?

There's a pattern which plays itself out in the Christian calendar, twice each year. The pattern is three-fold: *preparation*, *celebration*, and *sending*. Advent was our time of preparation, Christmas was our time of celebration, and now today with Epiphany we move like the Magi towards being sent out, fundamentally changed by our celebration.

And this pattern will repeat itself beginning in exactly one month with Ash Wednesday – the first day of Lent, *a time of preparation*, then Easter, *a time of celebration*, and finally Pentecost, *with another call to be sent out to spread the good news*.

And it's a pattern which is repeated in the very fabric of our worship – we *prepare to celebrate* by listening to the word of God in scripture and song, we *celebrate* with a feast at the table, and finally we are *sent out* to serve and spread the good news – *fundamentally* changed by a word and meal of hope.

The pilgrimage of the Magi reminds me a bit of my journey to Nicaragua almost a year ago. There was quite a lot of preparation – getting passports, purchasing tickets, arranging for hepatitis shots and other medical needs. Once we got to Nicaragua, the bus ride to the tiny, rural village of Rodeito was long and arduous.

And interestingly when we arrived, the celebration with which we were greeted was not exactly what we expected – it was even more humble and yet so much more hope-filled. This village in Nicaragua – just about as far away from power and privilege as you can get – welcomed our delegation from Custer Lutheran Fellowship and celebrated with song and food, stories and swimming, worship and conversation.

But I wonder if we who are entrenched and intoxicated with power and privilege have the hardest part with this third step in the pattern. I know I did. I struggled with coming home, being sent out, fundamentally changed. Because for me, coming back from Nicaragua, it's been a genuine struggle, a continual temptation to go back to the way things were, back to the seducing centers of power and privilege.

But maybe it's the greatest example that the Magi provide in the reading. After they celebrate, after they pay homage to the Christ child, they go home, but having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod – *not to*

return to the seducing centers of power and privilege – they take another road home.

What might it look like for us to *take another road home*? From a political system that's entrenched with power and privilege? From Iraq and the many other countries where the U.S. has entrenched powers? In our own lives, what would it mean for us to *take another road home*?

It's not as simple as it sounds, but while we've been celebrating Christmas and paying homage to the Christ child – like the Magi – God's been revealing another road home for us. I'm not sure what it looks like for you, I'm not sure what it looks like yet for me, but don't be surprised if God's presence shines like a star revealing and leading another way where there seemed to be no way.

Because *this is Epiphany – another road home being revealed like light in darkness.* God sending us out, away from the seduction of power and privilege into places of vulnerability and poverty. Because if there's anything we learned from Christmas which will carry us through Epiphany, it's this – that if you want a map of meaning, a map to find your way to something More, a map to God's presence; then begin your pilgrimage moving toward places of vulnerability and poverty. Because God will be there – bringing a different kind of power in the vulnerability and a new kind of privilege in the poverty. Amen.