

Solemnity of Epiphany January 8, 2023

**“And having been warned in a dream
not to return to Herod,
they departed for their country by a different route.”**

So concludes the Gospel passage from St. Matthew that we just heard, and brings to close the story of the magi. And this story, the only place the magi appear in the story of our salvation, is extremely short, a brief twelve verses. They quickly come on the scene in this one account and depart just as quickly. That means we know almost nothing about them, who they were, how many they were (traditionally three because there were three gifts mentioned, although we don't really know), where exactly they came from, what happened after they set out for their return trip - none of that. All we really know is that they interpreted the rising of a star in a particular way, followed the star where it led them, and evidently found what they were looking for. Oh, and one more thing, they returned home by a different route.

That last line might seem like a throwaway line, something included simply for dramatic effect (in that they were warned in a dream). Yet, it might mean more than would

appear at first glance. You see, earlier they had obeyed Herod's request when he called for them. But now they made a different choice, choosing to ignore Herod's desire that they report back to him. And what was different this time? What made them pay attention to a dream? What made them head down a path they had likely never traveled?

Their encounter with Jesus.

They entered Bethlehem one way, and left another, entered Bethlehem as they had always been, but left differently, not just externally, but probably internally as well. Something had changed, or rather, SOMEONE had changed them on the inside, for the better, in ways maybe they couldn't really understand.

And so the way "home" would no longer be a simple retracing of their steps. Rather, they would place their feet on new ground, tracing out a journey that was almost certainly new and unknown to them. Put simply, the way "home" was different this time because they themselves were different. God had something new in store for them. And their encounter with a little, helpless baby in a manger opened their hearts and minds to embrace

something that was probably the furthest thing from their minds when they first entered that tiny town. Here they were, overjoyed, prostrating themselves, offering their treasures and then leaving down a different road from the one they had come in on. How I wish we could do the same as we begin this New Year.

Many people (maybe most of us) really don't like heading down a different path. We like what is familiar. And so we often do things the way we always did them before. We tend to continue thinking the same way. Acting the same way. Seeing the same way. We often journey through life traveling the same roads, holding on to the same attitudes and biases and misguided priorities. Yet, it doesn't have to be that way. It shouldn't be that way. It mustn't be that way. And it starts with an encounter - an encounter with the One whose life and death has changed absolutely everything.

Maybe we don't think of a life of faith as being a life of encounters with our God. But indeed it is. And not simply occasional encounters with our God - Father, Son, and Spirit. And also certainly not a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. I'm talking about continual encounters with the living God, continual opportunities to peer into each

manger we come upon in our day-to-day lives, each person and situation in which our loving God comes to us on his terms, not ours. The truth is, pretty much everything we encounter through our life in the Church is meant to be just that. We encounter God in Scripture. We encounter God in the faith community. We encounter God in the beauty of our Churches and our music and our art and our devotions and in our service to others. And, of course, we encounter God in a profound way through the Sacraments, those special God-moments meant to transform us into something and someone we weren't before. Do we let that happen? Do we want that to happen? Or do we want to leave by the same route, down the same path, revisiting our old ways of thinking and acting and seeing?

It can be a little scary to step out into the unknown, to embrace things we never have embraced before. Yet, what we must be careful never to forget, what the story of the magi can teach each of us, is that following the path God maps for each of us - the path of kindness and generosity and compassion and love, always has the best of all possible endpoints, the best of all possible destinations . . . home.

That's where the magi were headed. Not the same as they were before, not by the same route, but rather changed by the transforming power of our God - our God who came to us as a baby long, long ago (and continues to come to us) in order to lead the world down a completely different path - the path we were meant to walk all along. Can we do it? Can we forgive someone we've been reluctant to - and head in a new direction? Can we try to understand people who are very different from ourselves - and head in a new direction? Can we give more than we have ever given before, and head in a new direction? And can we love people we find so hard to love - and head in a new direction?

“And . . . they departed . . . by a different route.”

May that not only be the choice of the magi, but may it be the choice each of us makes too.