“The Road Isn’t Straight” - Stephanie Sorge, 1/5/25

My dad lives in the Pittsburgh area, and I’ve learned over the years that there are many routes between here and there - and not a single one of them is straight. The shortest routes are mostly off interstate, and mostly without cell service. In these days of absolute reliance on GPS guidance, it can be a little stressful, especially when there are unexpected detours. The first time I drove there in my new van, I was excited to use satellite navigation, not reliant on cellular towers. I’ll never make that mistake again! Lost River State Park seems like a lovely place to visit, but I won’t be driving through it ever again. Like the magi, we returned home by another route.

The final blessing in our series is this: “The road isn’t straight.” Is that a blessing or a curse? It reminds me of the blessing/curse, “May you live in interesting times.” I can look back on my life journey and see that hardly anything has been straight. I’m an Enneagram 1. I like to accomplish what I set out to do. I generally think I know myself pretty well. So when I dwell too long on where I am and how I got here, compared to the journey I laid out for myself and where I thought I’d be… let’s just say, it’s humbling.

Hindsight is 20/20. And thank goodness 2020 is in our hindsight! When it comes to crooked and tricky terrain, I prefer to reflect on it in the rearview mirror. Thank goodness we made it through that! But how many of us would readily choose the twists, turns, and sometimes harrowing journeys, knowing what we know now?

The Magi who visited Jesus weren’t royalty, we don’t know if there were only three of them, and we don’t know that they were all men. A colleague recently shared that he had been chastised by a former head of staff for not knowing the names of the three wise men. How could my friend call himself a Biblical scholar and not know the names of Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior? Spoiler alert - they aren’t named in the Bible. Those names appeared hundreds of years later, and there are different names ascribed elsewhere. Syrian Christians call them Larvandad, Gushnasaph, and Hormisdas; in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, they are Hor, Karsudan, and Basanater, and Armenian Catholics name them Kagpha, Badadakharida, and Badadilma.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Here’s what we know from Matthew’s gospel - which is the only canonical gospel in which they appear. They were magi from the east. This probably referred to a leadership sect within a totally different religion. They were students of the stars - astronomers. Some have called them astrologers, though in our context that can be reductive and dismissive. Though nothing strictly scientific could correlate a particular star with the birth of a king, they weren’t wrong, either… They were either wealthy or had access to great wealth to fund the journey and provide the lavish gifts for Jesus. They were connected enough to know that King Herod would be the first logical stop in their quest. They knew that what was happening was worthy of dropping everything to pursue. And though they set out with riches seeking a newborn king, when they found Mary and Jesus in their humble circumstances, they knew they had found what they bad been seeking. Though they were from a different country and practitioners of a different religion, they bowed down to worship and honor Jesus. The magi were open to the wisdom of revelation, offered to them in ways that they would have expected to receive it, leading them to an unexpected destination.

The magi knew they didn’t know exactly where they were going. They just knew they had to go. Whatever they were seeking was worth the journey, wherever it might take them. It made them bold to appear before King Herod, who was one of the most powerful leaders in the Western world. It made them open enough to embrace the humble family and scene they met as the object of their heart’s search, worthy of devotion.

What would be precious enough for you to embark on such a journey? What is important enough to make us venture into the unknown? What is compelling enough to keep us heading down a path we know will be hard, and potentially costly? What is our guiding light? Some still look to the stars and planetary movement for guidance. That’s about as scientific as the Star Words we’re about to select. What is a star word? It’s a word written on a star. It’s an invitation to approach the year and your prayer life through a lens you haven’t chosen for yourself. This practice has been really meaningful for some people - and less so for others. You just might be surprised by how God speaks to you through this word.

How else do we expect God to speak to us today? Answers will vary, but at the end of the day, God’s revelation is not confined to our expectations. It doesn’t follow any rules we create. We believe that God is revealed to us most clearly in the person of Jesus Christ, and so together, we seek to follow him. It’s a pretty big tenet of our faith - but we also recognize that God’s revelation is not restricted to our little stream of faith connected to the great river of Christianity, nor to the river of Christianity itself.

We know more about the world, our galaxy, and the universe beyond, than ever before. We have maps and GPS systems to guide us wherever we want to go. We have confidence that we can achieve what we set out to do. But following God’s call is not a journey we can plan or control. And that makes me a little sick to my stomach, if I’m being honest.

In many ways, the magi were far better equipped for that kind of a journey than most of us will ever be. They could rely on the stars for navigation, no cellular towers needed. They knew how to prepare for it. They went with appropriate provisions, but held their treasures loosely. They relied on their acquired knowledge to launch the pilgrimage, but kept their hearts and minds open to be led by divine wisdom. They also had each other. Recalling the blessing from a few weeks ago, we can’t go alone.

Sometimes it feels like we’re traveling alone, walking a path no one else can walk with us. If we’re being honest, that solo trek might even be our preference. There’s no one to slow us down or to argue about which way to go. No one to see when we fall and fail. We can be independent, self-reliant, masters of our own domain. What an enticing recipe for disaster. We were never meant to do this alone.

God is still at work in the world, calling us to journeys not yet known to us. Maybe that’s comforting as we enter a new year with a bit of fear and trembling. We never know what’s ahead, really. Every step forward requires a bit of faith. We don’t walk alone. God calls us to this journey as a community. Each of us brings something to the journey, whether we know it yet or not. We need each other.

I pray for the journey ahead, wherever it will lead us. When the route is uncertain, may God illumine the next right step. When we find ourselves faltering, may we feel the hands, arms, and loving prayers that surround us. Let us reach out our own hands in love and support, offering the gifts that have been entrusted to us. And may we keep our hearts and minds open to the divine wisdom that will lead us to each stop along the way. Amen.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\_Magi [↑](#footnote-ref-1)