

There are just so many wonderful characters in this Christmas story about the birth of Jesus.

Mary and Joseph, scared and anxious like all first time parents, yet trusting that God is doing something miraculous.

The Shepherds – rough, rougish characters, willing to act on an impulse even if it was backed up by a heavenly choir.

King Herod, wanting control yet inherently suspicious and jealous. Herod was in middle management, having to worry about Rome yet also constantly fearing for his kingdom.

The Chief priests and scribes, looking and studying about God, but not really eager for a real live encounter with the living God.

But maybe we can best identify with these visitors from afar. These strange or wise travelers – depending on your point of view. We can identify with them because all of us like them are on a journey. Each of us are on a life journey and many of us are on a journey of faith. We have each been touched by something and that is why we are here on a Sunday morning and why we seek to follow that light to its source.

With and from the wise men we can discover that there are no prerequisites for encountering the living God, no preambles to serving God.

These travelers were astrologers, men who told futures, priests in a foreign religion. If we were to meet them we may well be tempted to dismiss them as new agers! The risk would be that if they came to our door and said they had heard Jesus had come again and were heading towards Myrtle Beach, would we follow them? No, we would do just what the scribes did, tell them our Scriptures about Jesus and send them on their way.

With and from the wise men we can discover that the journey to God is not a straight line.

Sure they got themselves to the right neighborhood, but were they really that wise? They saw a star and followed it faithfully and when they got to the local zipcode, rather than following the star further, they stopped at the palace. Ever noticed that? They stopped to ask Herod. Paranoid, vengeful, violent, old Herod – Herod – the Godfather, the head of the 12 families! They knocked on his door and told him what the stars had told them - that the new king was born. They followed their own pre-conceived notions of where the king would be born and as a result they head for the palace in the capital city. Their journey to Jesus was not a straight line, neither is our journey of faith.

Parker Palmer is a respected educator and author. In his book “Let Your Life Speak” he describes his search for God’s call, when he joined a Quaker community for a few months. He writes “If I were ever to discover a new direction, it would be at Pendle Hill, a community rooted in prayer, study and a vision of human possibility. But when I arrived and started sharing my vocational quandary, people responded with a traditional Quaker counsel that, despite their intentions, left me even more discouraged. “Have faith” they said and “way will open.” “His frustration mounted: “I have faith” I thought to myself, “What I don’t have is time to wait for way to open. I’m approaching middle age at

warp speed, and I have yet to find a vocational path that feels right. The only way that's opened so far is the wrong way."

After a few months of deepening frustration, he took his troubles to an older Quaker woman well known for her thoughtfulness and candor. He describes his dilemma and disappointment of listening for his calling but no way is opening, of trying to find his vocation for a long time, and of not having the foggiest idea what he's meant to do.

He writes: "Ruth's reply was a model of Quaker plain-speaking: "I'm a birthright Quaker," she said somberly. "And in 60 plus years of living, the way has never opened in front of me." She paused and I started sinking into despair. Was this wise woman telling me that the Quaker concept of: God's guidance was a hoax? Then she spoke again, this time with a grin. "But a lot of way has closed behind me, and that's had the same guiding effect."

With and from the wise men we can discover that each time a door closes, the rest of the world opens up. All we need to do is stop pounding on the door that has just closed, turn around, which puts the closed or closing door behind us, and welcome and move into the largeness of life that God has opened up ahead of us.

With and from the wise men we can discover that when this happens, when we have met God and when we have seen the possibilities that God opens to us we cannot go home the same way you came, we have to go on by another road.

We have to go on by another road, for we cannot come and celebrate the peace and joy of Christmas, we cannot feel that closeness to God and to one another, then all of a sudden pack up the tree, throw away the broken toys and stale cookies, and fall back into old patterns. Can we?

We have to go on by another road, for we cannot lose sight of God's star amidst the neon of the world and fall into the easy path imagining that things bring happiness. The God who you felt when you held a candle and sang "Silent Night" is the God who is still here, still beckoning, still leading and going before us.

Just as the wise men needed to avoid Herod's jealousy, political pressure and hatred, so we have to go on in our journey of faith by ensuring that the focus of our lives is on growing with God, continuing to seek, to know and to be known by the Living God.

I considered illustrating my point of going on by another road by suggesting that during the offering today rather than the ushers pass the plates that we all bring forward our offering today and then go back to different seats. But not wanting to start a riot, or panic the ushers, instead let me suggest that when our worship service concludes that you divert from your usual route out of the Sanctuary and offer greetings to someone new or different.

Or maybe next week you could try sitting somewhere different in the sanctuary, or with someone whom you really don't know too well.

With and from the wise men we can discover that Christmas is not over, not the real Christmas anyway. The Retail Yuletide Frenzy may have ended but Christmas has just begun. And as we prepare

to celebrate and begin the New Year, it is the meaning and message and significance and Savior of Christmas that we still need.

Let me suggest a couple or three resolutions for us as we enter into 2010.

Let us trust and celebrate that life has not and never will, “get back to “normal””, because after Christmas, after the birth of Jesus Christ, there is no “normal” anymore. And whisper it - life will get yet more abnormal the closer we get to Easter. The phrase “new normal” has entered our vocabulary as a description of how everyone has needed to adjust their behavior, their spending and savings habits in the life of the economic downturn. With and from God there is always a call to us to live in the new normal not try to get back to normal. God has new things to ask of us, new things for us to do, new challenges to accept, new experiences to share, new service to render, new songs to sing, new friends to make, new steps to take as we move ahead in our spiritual life by another road.

Let us commit to acknowledging that God is loving enough and big enough to use anyone, including both you and me, if I and you make ourselves available. For too long the Church of Jesus Christ in some places and communities has and still does limit and restrict who can serve God in certain capacities and ministries. In the Presbyterian Church (USA) we affirm that God calls all men and women into all the ministries of Christ in and through the Church. Our youth need to see this truth lived, our more elderly members need to see this truth lived, our women, our men, our birthright Presbyterians and our newer Presbyterians need to see this truth lived – God has a call for each and all of us.

Let us commit to keep seeking and celebrating that the journey to God is hardly ever in a straight one but is full of joy, and further that we will commit to sharing with one another here in our church and with friends everywhere the different paths that this journey to God will take us. By so sharing we nurture one another, we affirm God’s call upon us all and we can encourage and support one another each step we take.

Let us commit to practicing the rigorous discipline of community, to keep on deciding to live in community, supporting each other within the bonds of Christian community. To live in Christ-like community, even or especially in the church is difficult; sometimes living in such community is downright unpleasant as we deal with each other’s failings and foibles, but living in such community is always rewarding. To live in community has to be our choice because it is God’s plan for God’s people. The goodness of dwelling in unity with brothers and sisters of faith far outweighs the difficulties. Yes, committing to community means that we will have to partner with people whom we find it difficult to like but whom we do need to love.

Let us commit to do all we can to continue to open our doors to and with and for all people, let us commit to encourage the stranger to enter into the life of Oakland Avenue Presbyterian Church and here discover a radiant acceptance and welcome. Let us seek to notice any and all barriers that we erect even unconsciously that prevent all kinds of people from becoming a lively part of our expanding community.

“By another road” when I finished writing the original manuscript for this sermon this was the point where I moved to my conclusion that is until I read the article in yesterday’s Rock Hill Herald about

Sermon: By another road

the excesses of Pay Day lending in SC. 391% - that is the maximum interest rate that can be charged in our State. I wonder how many of the clients we assist through Hope House or are served by Pilgrim's Inn or another Night Shelter who in part are in need because they at some time got caught up in pay day lending. So by another road would lead me to urge us to commit to change the nature of the businesses on Cherry Road not just the size of the signs.

With and from the wise men we too can journey to worship and honor the Christ Child.

By another road God would lead us.

By another road, God would take us on in the next stage of our journey of faith.

By another road because when we have gazed on the child in the manger, when we have been grasped hold of, by the Living God, we can never be the same again.

By another road God has a future for all of us setting out to live as new people forever changed by our encounter with Jesus, forever journeying – by another road. Amen.