

Matthew 2:1-12  
“Home by Another Way”  
December 11, 2011

Finish this phrase: There’s more than one way to \_\_\_\_\_ . No, not that! You’re trying to get me in trouble with PETA or the SPCA! Here’s how I finish that phrase: There’s more than one way to *get back home*.

Our theme this Advent is “Home for Christmas.” We started with “The Longing for Home—home is where Christ is.” Last Sunday we said that “When Home Is Hard—Emmanuel, God Is with Us.” Next week the choir will bring Christmas home with their “Appalachian Carols.” But for today, the message is this: There’s more than one way to get back home.

Growing up, I was blessed to live in a tiny village where one set of grandparents lived a block east to the of us and the other grandparents lived a block and a half north. One afternoon my brother Alan walked up to Grandma Schwerdtfeger’s. When he was ready to come home, Grandma called my mom to let her know he was on his way. Now let me paint you a picture: you could stand in our front yard and watch someone walk out of Grandma’s front door. That’s how close we lived. After two or three minutes, mom looked out the window. No sign of Alan. “Hmm . . .” she said and went back to her work. After five minutes, she looked again and not seeing any sign of Alan, she called Grandma to see if maybe he’d

decided to stay longer after all. “No,” Grandma said, “he left several minutes ago.”

Well, by that time, it was all alarms. Had someone snatched him? Had he run away? Grandma came over to stay with me while mom got in the car and drove around to look for him. For me, the little brother, it was pretty exciting, but also kind of scary. After almost a half hour—and trust me, in a half hour you could cover every street in my home town, several times—mom came back from her drive. No Alan. But just then Alan strolled in the door. We all ran over to him, and after hugging him and making sure he was all right, Mom asked him, “Where have you been?” To which Alan replied without further explanation, “I took a short-cut.”

My mom went ballistic, reading him the riot act. And I still remember my Grandma, who never interfered in how my parents raised their kids; she said: “Well, he *is* okay, Oteka. And after all,” she said, “there’s more than one way get home.”

The truth is, there’d better be more than one way to get home, because between where you are and home, there will always be something in the way. Whether it’s families longing for soldiers longing to come home from overseas, or disconnected church members trying to find a way to

reconnect, or commuters trying to get on I71 through all the construction downtown—there's got to be more than one way to get back home.

Here's the story: The Wise Men traversed afar, making their way from the East, all the way to Bethlehem, where Jesus the Messiah was born. The Wise Men were interested in Jesus because they had seen the star that rose at his birth, the star of a King that led them to the place where he was born. But along the way they met King Herod, who ruled Judea on behalf of Rome. Herod had his own reasons for finding Jesus, since anyone called king was a threat to his own power and position. Herod wanted Jesus found and put to death, and he enlisted the Wise Men in his conspiracy. But the Wise Men, having bowed down and worshiped the baby Jesus, having given their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and so, Matthew says, they left for their own country by another road. They went home by another way. There is, after all, more than one way to get home.

Here's one thing this story means: It's easy to bow down and worship when you're right there with the Christ child. I mean, who wouldn't pay homage in the presence of the newborn King? It's easy to be give

generous gifts, it's easy to see the light, it's easy to feel close to God, when you're right there in Bethlehem. The trick is getting home with all that—to still be generous after you leave Bethlehem, to take the light of Christ with you, to feel close to God when you get back home.

Because it seems like there's always something between you and home. The Christmas story calls this something "Herod"—the power that tries to overwhelm you, the evil that pulls you off course, the trouble that makes every step hard. Herod set his trap for the visitors from the East, but they went home by another way. They were Wise Men, after all. So here's one message: don't let anything stand in your way, my friends. There's always another way to get home.

King Herod has been dead and gone, of course, for over 2000 years. But make no mistake, Herod is still around—only the names have changed. Where we live, evil may not be quite as focused in one king or dictator, but the forces of violence and oppression are just as real as ever. In Christ Church where I served there was a woman, I'll call her Pearl. Pearl is African-American, younger than I am, but had been through ten times more than I hope I ever will. Pearl never had enough money for a car, so when she moved to the East side, she could walk to Christ Church, and she

jumped in with both feet. She cooked for our Community Dinners and she had a way of rounding up every kid in the neighborhood for Sunday school—half of them seemed to be related to her in some way. Her faith was vibrant and enthusiastic when she came to Christ Church.

But Herod kept popping up. Pearl is raising her nephew because his mother has a crack problem, was still in prison when I met them. The boy's life had been hard, and he often made bad choices. He picked up a discarded gun on his way to school one day and put it in his locker. He was expelled for 60 days. It broke her heart and made her afraid.

She had to have abdominal surgery and as a Medicaid patient got substandard care, had to have a second surgery and it got infected. She missed months of work. Meantime her alcoholic father got too sick to live by himself and refused to go to a nursing home. The rest of her family turned their backs, so he came to live with Pearl, requiring constant care. Then her mother died; then her daddy died. In the middle of one night she called me so her family could come to the church for the rest of the night—there'd been a drive-by shooting at their apartment complex and the shooters had threatened to come back. They moved to another complex to be safer, and there was a drive-by shooting there that wounded a baby two doors down.

And after each one of these things, Pearl would come to church and sit down and cry. She'd say, "Pastor Glenn, I don't think I can take any more. I'm too tired. I'm going to lose my faith." And every time we'd sit and pray, gather some people to help her out, and she'd get back up and follow the star one more time. They got evicted from this second apartment, and were a day or two from having to go to a shelter, but at the last minute a distant relative let them have half a double on the West side for what they could afford to pay. She was relieved, but really didn't want to move so far from the rest of her family and her church—I'd never seen her so down. But after a week or so, she called and invited me to come see their new place. When I got there she flung the door open and said, "Welcome to our new home!" And she showed me two things: the Bible was in the middle of her coffee table, and she'd already put together a schedule of church members to pick her up every Sunday for church.

Why am I telling you this story? Well, because it's easy to have faith, it's easy to pray and give thanks, it's easy to feel close to God, when you're in Bethlehem, in some special and holy place. The trick is getting home with that. Whatever Herod threw at her, Pearl got home another way. Between where you are and home, there will always be something in the

way. But don't let anything stop you, my friends. There's always another way to get back home.

Of course, it doesn't take tragedy and violence to come between you and home, whether at Christmas or any time. For so many people nowadays, it's this simple: the old ways home just don't work any more. Our families are so busy and scattered—how do you find time for those old stand-bys of Sunday school, youth group and Bible study? People have been telling us for years that committee meetings and church socials don't do it for them any more. And for most of the last two generations, the good old hymns and boring old preaching just don't get their hearts home to God. If they're going to get home at all, lots of younger folks are going to get there another way. I for one plan to offer some other ways. Anybody got any ideas?

But sometimes what most comes between you and home is . . . well, yourself. Our stubborn pride, our misplaced desires, our fear get in the way. People buy bigger and bigger houses in better and better zip codes, only to find out you can be just as empty and dissatisfied in a big house in the suburbs as a small apartment in the city. Some people are always

looking for a new man or a new woman, someone to make them feel safe and loved, only to find out that no one can make you feel at home if you're not at home in your own heart. We cut ourselves off from the people we love and need the most, because "I'm sorry" is hard to say and forgiveness is hard to offer.

No, if you're going to get home, you're going to have to get there by other ways than those. Home is less about how big the rooms are, and more about slowing down long enough to do something meaningful in them. A sense of home begins with prayer and faith, a deep trust that God is with you wherever you are and whatever you've done. And while home is a place of rest and be restored, home is always about making room for others—for children, for the elderly, for strangers, for the poor. Open up your heart, open up your house, and it's always more like home.

It sure does seem like there's always something between you and home—some power that tries to overwhelm you, some evil to pull you off course, some trouble that makes every step hard. Herod is alive and well. And sometimes Herod is us. But when Herod sets his trap for you, just go home by another way. We can be Wise Men, too. Don't let anything stand in your way, my friends. There's always another way to get back home.

I want to say one more thing about this. When you truly find the Christ, any way you go will be “another” way. How can life ever be the same after finding God’s own Son? Having traveled far to Bethelhem, having knelt beside the Child and opened our treasures, even old ways shine with a holy light. You can go home, in fact I suspect we’ll all go home today, but having met the Christ, you’ll go home another way.

Wherever you live, whatever your life is like this year, find your home, my friends, in Christ. Come to Jesus—open your hearts and open your treasures, and your life will never be the same again. And when you go, whether you head straight home or take one of my brother Alan’s “shortcuts,” don’t let anything stand in your way. As grandma said, “There’s more than one way to get back home.”