

“And That Has Made All the Difference”
 Sermon Preached at Christ Congregational UCC, December 28, 2008
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Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6
 Matthew 2:1-12

As many of you know by now, I have spent much of the past year involved in a docent training program down at the Denver Art Museum, and I have spent countless hours learning about the architecture of the two buildings, about 150 of the thousands of art objects in the Museum's collection, about how to conduct school tours and about how to lead adult Collection Highlights Tours. Over the summer, I began leading the latter tours which include a forty-five minute discussion of 5-6 art objects spread over both buildings: the North and the Hamilton. When I begin my tours, and, after introductions have been made, I lead my flock over to the North Building and to the 6th Floor's Discovery Library where my favorite painting is displayed: “Madonna and Child with Saints Ambrose and Jerome”. This particular rendition dates from 1511 and was created by Bernardo Zenale, who lived in Milan during the turn of the 15th-16th Centuries and who was greatly influenced by Leonardo da Vinci's sense of color and style. Featured in the center of the painting is the mother, Mary, holding the baby Jesus on her lap, and on either side, balancing one another in fine example of Renaissance symmetry, are the adoring figures of Saints Ambrose and Jerome, arrayed respectively in the typical vestments of a Bishop for Ambrose and a Cardinal for Jerome. Joseph hovers in the background, symbolizing his importance as the legal father of Jesus and as the patron saint of workers. The colors of this oil painting are bright and jewel-like, with brilliant hues of red and blue and yellow featured in clothing and in surrounding details, but the center of the painting, where Mary and Jesus are

featured, is the heart of the painting, immediately commanding the viewer's attention. Jesus, without a covering of any kind and probably very cold, judging by the amount of clothing the others are wearing, sits sedately on Mary's lap and reaches out his hand toward St. Ambrose's staff, - so typical of an exploring baby, - while Ambrose remains stoically posed and seemingly oblivious to this child's endearing charm. He and Mary are both facing St. Jerome, ostensibly listening intently to what he is trying to say to them. At any rate, I often find that as I look at this painting, I feel a strong impulse to take Jesus into my arms and to hold him close in order to warm him, and to give him my undivided attention at least, while others give theirs elsewhere, and, in so doing, to savor what I imagine, would be the great and incredible joy certain to result from such an action. Perhaps, all who came to visit the holy family, immediately after the birth of Jesus and some years later, would have wanted to feel that same joy, that same close connectedness to Jesus. Perhaps, holding the child in their arms as an intimate means of showing their praise and love, as means beyond the distance required for kneeling at the family's feet, was what all the visitors, all the shepherds, all the magi, all the special guests wanted to experience, just as I often want to do when I visit this beloved family, preserved, now, almost five hundred years, in this compelling and beautiful painting.

This morning's Gospel lesson, already alluded to in Jerry's sermon last Sunday, features the amazing story of the Magi's long and extensive personal journey to find, and then to behold the actuality of Jesus, of the Christ Child, the Messiah, of whom they had heard for so long a time. They travel in the time of King Herod after the time of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, about two years after Jesus was born, in fact, and stop, first, in Jerusalem to inquire where this child might be. They have observed "his" star and have

come to pay him homage. Soon, King Herod hears of their arrival and of their inquiries concerning the child, and he meets secretly with the Magi, requesting that they “go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” The astronomers set out and continue to follow the star until they find it perfectly positioned above the place where Jesus lay. They enter the house; they kneel down and offer their respect; they give the child impressive gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh; - and, as they prepare to leave on their promised return to Herod in Jerusalem, they dream a disturbing dream that conveys a warning not to go back; and they decide not to retrace their steps but to change their route home.

For the most part, over all the Christmases of hearing this famous story, I have, for some reason, always passed over the ending of this story which reads: “They left for their own country by a different road.” For some reason, this sentence has seemed more an “add-on”, almost an afterthought, than an integral part of this segment of the overall story. But, this year, that last sentence seemed to stand out, snagging my interest, becoming an imperative aspect of the passage, requiring greater consideration and thought.

Almost immediately, I remembered that famous poem by Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,*

*Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Two roads diverged, both just as fair, both almost equally worn from previous travel, yet both were not equally beneficial for the Magi's purposes, and the Magi chose the one less traveled by, doubting that they would ever come back someday and take the other. —And, as it has turned out, that has made all the difference.

Pursuing the fulfillment of their ability to read the messages of stars made all the difference. Following one such star to their Christ-filled destination made all the difference, and listening to a dream's warning about Herod's true intentions to kill his young rival made all the difference, and that difference ended up affecting the ongoing evolution of the world in remarkable and amazing ways.

The main idea here, however, is that the Magi were greatly affected and inspired by their visit with the Holy Family, and, most specifically, with Jesus Christ. There are those of us who believe that they found in this tiny human being God's amazing covenant revised and expressed in a new and powerful way, a way which revealed God in human flesh and form, flesh of

our flesh, bone of our bone, blurring the distinction between the holy and the ordinary human being. If we understood all of this fully, we might behave more like Sharon, a five year old little girl who, one Christmas, explained her take on the story in the following way: *“Then the baby was borned, and do you know who he was? ...The baby was God,’ she whispered and leaped into the air, twirled around and dove into the sofa, where she covered her head with pillows.”* And I wonder if those of us without pillows over our heads have truly understood the Incarnation’s Good News yet.

Well, like Sharon, the Magi did. The Magi understood that the baby was God and that God had a new plan for God’s new-born King of the Jews, a plan that bore no resemblance to Herod’s demented, devious, and deceitful understanding of a ruler’s power and might. In realizing this, the life of Jesus Christ was saved from Herod’s murderous hand by pagan astronomers full of wonder, mystery, and reverence, who wore crowns disguising the pillows over their heads and who had the courage needed to find a new way home.

Ultimately, the story of the Magi, or the Three Wise Men, is a story about the wisdom needed to discern the essential difference between good and evil power in our world. In the Biblical sense, wisdom is the “ability to judge correctly and to follow the best course of action, based on knowledge and understanding”. Much like our Magi, being wise means obtaining the vital knowledge and understanding needed in order to recognize the right course of action, -and, equally important, having the will and courage to follow it through. Because of the warning given to the Magi in their dream, they responded to the suspicions they had arrived at about Herod and the knowledge and understanding they had gained about Jesus Christ and

followed a new course of action, using both their courage and will to achieve it.

In his book, The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck discusses the nature of power and says that there are two kinds of power: political and spiritual. Certainly, our passage today from Matthew is a lesson about both kinds, with Herod the embodiment of political power and with Jesus the spiritual. Peck says that *“Political power is the capacity to coerce others, overtly or covertly, to do one’s will. The capacity resides in a position such as a kingship or presidency, or else in money. It does not reside in the person who occupies the position or possesses the money. Consequently, and most significantly, political power is basically unrelated to goodness or wisdom.”* Spiritual power, on the other hand, can be understood as similar to wisdom’s discernment between good and evil choices and the accompanying moral fiber to do the right thing. Spiritual power *“...resides entirely within the individual and has nothing to do with the capacity to coerce others. People of great spiritual power may be wealthy and may upon occasion occupy political positions of leadership, but they are as likely to be poor and lacking in political authority...It is the capacity to make decisions with maximum awareness”* It is a heightened consciousness of consequences affecting the welfare of others, of results and probable outcomes.” Peck goes on to say that spiritual power contains the *“joy of communion with God, of alignment with the mind of God.”*

Another writer, Walter Wink, has written a book entitled, Engaging the Powers, Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination. In one section of the book, Wink has created a chart which clarifies the differences between the Domination system, or, in Peck’s words, political power, and God’s domination-free order, much like Peck’s spiritual power. Here are a

few examples of the differences in Societal Modes: In the Domination System, power is defined as "Power over, power to take life, control, destroy; Win-lose, Competition, - and God's Domination-free Order power is defined as power with; power to give, support, nurture life; Win-win; Partnership; Cooperation. In the area of Economics, the Domination System is characterized as Exploitation, greed, privilege, and inequality. - God's Domination-free Order lists Sharing, sufficiency, responsibility, and equality as essential requirements. In another category, Relationships, we find the following differences: The Domination System promotes Ranking; domination hierarchies; Slavery, classism, and racism; We /they; and Rigidity. -God's Domination-free Order supports Linking; Actualization goals and achievements; Equality of opportunity; We/we; and Flexibility.

With the use of wisdom, of spiritual power, of coming to some kind of understanding similar to Domination-free power, the Magi made wise decisions about their own actions and had the courage and will to counteract Herod's self-serving and malevolent schemes. They had come to see the value in something different from the politics they had always known, and they had come to see the possibilities in new powers, in just and caring powers, which might be God's hope in blessing the world with this new child borned in Bethlehem, and they could no longer submit to a despotic ruler and comply with his demands.

Defying Herod-power or, political power, takes great courage and conviction. We in the United Church of Christ often attempt to do this with our resolutions focusing on equality, inclusivity, and equal rights, on power-with and win-win and sharing and linking and we/we vs. we/they. We have made hard choices, using wisdom and confidence in these choices, listening to spirit and not politics, considering domination-free options, and we have

tried to take some different roads and new paths. And the battles have been long at times and hard and discouraging, but we have persevered.

I remember one General Synod back in the early '90's when the delegates were wrestling with a particularly difficult equal rights issue having to do with Open and Affirming – our attempt to include all people in all areas of church life and not just those who are heterosexual. I don't remember the exact resolution on the table, but I do remember Lori Miller's witnessing statement in favor of equality. She stood at the microphone and very carefully and very eloquently described what it had been like to meet the man she was to marry, what it had been like to date that man and to walk hand in hand with that man and to bring him home to her family and to have him meet her friends and to plan their wedding and to pick out their rings and to be married, legally, in the church, and to do all of this in the public eye. There were no second guesses or closets they had to hide in; they could be open and free at all times. And then, she described what it is like for those with different options, with different sexual orientations and relationship experiences, what it is like for those who can't be as free with their joy and their love. There would be little openness, less spontaneity; public show of affection would be frowned upon – no hand in hand walks down a street;— there would often be little family joy, -and friends with whom to share the excitement and good news might have to be trusted and few; rings could be bought, but discreetly, a commitment ceremony could be planned and even a pastor could officiate, but a legal ceremony would not be allowed, - on Lori went, continuing to outline more of such painful discrepancies. In that whole entire arena, you could have heard a pin drop. Silence, in this case, was golden, as the delegates and visitors all listened with intense concentration, and, later, when Lori had finished, the people

gave her a standing ovation. Lori had listened to a wise voice, a spiritually powerful voice, a domination-free voice and had chosen to walk a road less traveled, in a brave direction, and, of course, whatever the resolution was, it passed with little dissent.

It is often assumed that the courageous choice to go back home by a road less traveled is the end of this particular Biblical event, but, actually, it is the beginning. With the birth of Jesus and with the actions of the Magi, a new era, an alternative era, is set in motion, replacing evil and harm with God's overriding justice and love. The Magi comprehended the promise of Jesus Christ's true identity and purpose and wanted to insure that those possibilities would survive. They risked their lives in saving the new King of the Jews; they turned down a road much different from the powers of their time; they allowed God's voice and the wisdom it provided to direct their steps, and "That", my friends, "has made all the difference."

Amen...