

Recalculating
Isaiah 49:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

If you do not own a Global Positioning System yourself, you likely have been in the back seat of a friend’s car, on the way from here to there, when a voice insinuates itself into the conversation to announce, with a decidedly British accent, “Recalculating!” For one reason or another, you and your fellow pilgrims have strayed from the route determined to be the best when you first punched your destination into the dashboard.

A few short years ago, you would have been forced to concede that you simply were lost—maybe hopelessly turned around on the dark roads and amid the miniscule street signs of the Mainline, late for a dinner party or a meeting of some consequence. Back then, a filling station was often your only hope, where the proprietor would tell you to go back three lights, turn right, go two blocks, bear left and, at the house with the white picket fence turn left again. Or failing that, and assuming you had the right change in your pocket, you would drive in search of a public telephone, dial your host, describe the nearest intersection and then scribble a new set of directions on the back of an envelope in the dark.

Not so today! The split second after having zigged when you should have zagged, an insistent and somewhat irritated voice informs you that she is “recalculating”, implying that she will need a little time to retrieve your lost location from a satellite orbiting the earth, as well as communicating, in clipped syllables, that she expects a modicum of forbearance on your part if she is to send you, idiot that you are, on your way again.

The story before us on the first Sunday after Epiphany is a story layered with recalculations. Emailed jokes about wise women notwithstanding, the scene opens with wise

men from the East asking for directions. You could say that they had been led as far as Jerusalem by an ancient Global Positioning System known as the stars. Academicians from Persia or thereabouts, the wise men were the empiricists of their day, specializing in medicine, religion, astronomy and astrology. If asked, they would tell you that they had spent their lives living by the light of human reason. But something strange and inexplicable had entered into their reasonable way of knowing: a star so bright that it could not be explained or ignored. They had no choice but to see where the star would take them.

We have known such lights in our lives, those unforeseen intrusions, upsetting an otherwise well-ordered and reasonable human existence, that cause our eyes to look up or our hearts to be cast down, that find us letting go of routine or holding on all the more fiercely to the known world, that require us to rethink old certainties or flat-out refuse the questions, that necessitate the digging in of our heels or the recalculation of our destination. Though I must confess that a star, by itself, can be suspect and subject to the sort of spiritual imaginings that sometimes have more to do with indigestion than with the incarnate God!

So apparently the wise men also had a text. According to Walter Brueggemann, they plotted their pilgrimage by way of the 60th of Isaiah. Originally the prophet had written these words of comfort and promise to Jews in Jerusalem who had returned from exile. Finding themselves in a bombed-out city and a bottomed-out economy, God's people were in utter despair. All evidence to the contrary, the prophet tells them to arise, shine, for their light has come; tells them prosperity is on the way to Jerusalem in the form of gold and frankincense and myrrh, riches that will be carried on the backs of camels from foreign nations. Perhaps, the wise men reasoned, the star portended the fulfillment of the prophet's words. So with the text in hand and the star in sight, they were led to the city of Jerusalem, where they reasonably might have

stopped and stayed to pay homage to Herod.

We have done the same. We plot our pilgrimage by way of a text, a national narrative, a political ideology, a sacred story that sends us into the unknown future with great expectations. Perhaps it is our pursuit of knowledge that will be furthered by a little sabbatical suffused with light; perhaps it is the power and importance and prosperity that awaits us in the city; or maybe we have set out to find our one true love who is the happiness we have sought in all the wrong places; or will the future we have missed by moments be lived out through the lives of our children? In any case, there comes the moment in time when we think we have arrived, when the destination we first punched into the dashboard appears on the horizon. Going up to Jerusalem, surely the wise men thought they had arrived.

But this was not to be the case. For some reason, they thought instead that they were lost; something led them to believe they had zigged when they should have zagged; something prompted them to seek another set of directions. So they walked through the marketplace of Jerusalem asking after the location of the child foretold by the prophet Isaiah, the child whose birth the star appeared to portend, the child who was to rule over God's people Israel. I think it was this nagging sense of being lost without him in the world that led them to question the text, to recalculate the route.

How is it that you and I come to realize we are lost without him? Sometimes you can spend your whole life swallowing hard and telling yourself that this is your reasonable, rational life. Or you can keep your mouth shut, your head down and act as though this combination of chance and accident was the destination you had in mind all along. But even if you manage to make it through your broken human existence this way, there comes a time you begin to ask if you have stopped a bit short, were off course by a mile or two, from person you were meant to be

in him. The time has come to get directions from someone other than your sorry self to his manger.

Now you can imagine how threatening these questions are to everyone else around you. All Jerusalem, in fact, was troubled. Moreover, word of the wise men's inquiries soon reached the reigning king. Hearing that a potential rival to his present power had been born, a frightened Herod set about recalculating his own position. Summoning the royal stable of wise men who were the religious establishment, the king demands directions for himself: Where was this new king of the Jews, this Messiah to be born? It turns out the wise men had the wrong text! "Isaiah 60 will mislead you," Brueggemann imagines the Old Testament scholars saying to the king, "because it [erroneously] suggests Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy."

Now Herod is even more troubled. Nevertheless, he asks if they have a better text. The scholars point him to the words of the prophet Micah, words that speak of a leader who will come forth out of Bethlehem and shepherd God's people Israel. Bethlehem it is, then. He summons the wise men and, in order to recalculate the nearness of this imminent and immanent threat to his power, he asks what time the star first appeared. Then he orders them, as though events were still his to command: "Go and search diligently for the child (while I, in the meantime, recalculate the direction my reign of terror might take)."

God only knows the turns we have missed, the chances not taken, the truth denied, the community left wanting because of a text that led us to zig when we were born to zag. The wise men had been off by nine miles to the north. "It is mind-boggling to think how the story might have gone," says Brueggemann, "had Herod's interpreters not remembered Micah." But even if the wise men had lingered in the city, here is the hope: the light was there, waiting for the

moment when they looked up again, the right text in hand. So it went before them, until it stood over the place where the child was. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” We made it, they must have whispered to one another lest they wake the child. The lost are found! We know the feeling. Then these foreigners, these gentiles according to the vast majority of exegetes, bowed down and worshipped him. Gentiles! Here, finally, is the detail that brings us to the most significant recalculation of all.

For Matthew, the star that led the wise men to the manger signaled no mere human recalculation, but God’s recalculation. No doubt Matthew began to write “the book of the origins of Jesus Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham” with the last words of his risen Lord in mind: Go ye therefore into all the world, making disciples of all nations: of all gentiles. Could it be that this child was to be the revelation of God’s recalculation concerning the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s loving purposes toward the likes of us? Matthew recalculates the entire messianic script by way of the words of the Great Commission: from Jesus’ conception without the help of David’s line, to the gentiles who alone worshipped him in Bethlehem, to Jesus’ relocation in “Galilee of the Gentiles’ precisely in order to begin a ministry in which he will ‘proclaim justice to the Gentiles’ and in which these same Gentiles will ‘hope in his name,’ Accordingly,” writes New Testament professor Dorothy Jean Weaver, “in spite of his own calling to ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel,’ Jesus finds himself compelled to reach out in ‘compassion’ and ‘amazement’ beyond the ‘house of Israel’ to gentiles.” Think of the centurion at Capernaum, a man under orders, who believed Jesus could heal his paralyzed servant; the “insistent faith” of the Canaanite woman who likened herself to a dog eating the crumbs from the table as she begged Jesus to heal her daughter; the confession of the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross saying, “Truly this was the son of God.” “The story of the magi

anticipates all this,” writes Catholic New Testament scholar Donald Senior, anticipates the recalculation of God’s redeeming purposes in him who born in Bethlehem.

How do we make sense of such a stunning turn in the plot? Our own text from Isaiah intimates one possibility: perhaps it was “too light a thing” that God’s servant should raise up the tribes of Jacob and restore the survivors of Israel: “I will give you as a light to the nations,” says the prophet, “that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

On this first Sunday after Epiphany, it remains for us, with the wise men, to go home by another way, recalculating the direction and meaning of the rest of our days by way of the light that shines from the face of him who was born for us. I think the recalculation that is faith is more like life before GPS, when we had to admit we were lost, when we had to stop and ask another for directions, when there was no audible or automatic voice to tell us where to turn and when, no route lighting up on the dashboard, no immediate help save him who accompanies us in the dark and is light enough to make it all the way home.

Now with you we let go the hurt and the pain and travel on with hope.

Now with you we leave the familiar paths behind, and step into the unknown.

Bless to us all, oh God, the doors we open, the thresholds we cross, the roads that lie before us.

Go with us as we journey on, and at our journey’s ending, open your arms and welcome us home.