

Where Did They Go?

Psalm 147, Matthew 2:1–12

Center Church

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

And then what happened? That’s the question I used to ask as a kid with all those Disney “happily ever after” animated films. Snow White, awakened from near death by a Prince she doesn’t know, rides off to the castle. Then what happened? Ditto Cinderella, now with two shoes, and Sleeping Beauty. We know what happened to Jesus, and a bit about Mary, anyway. Nothing about the shepherds who came to the stable, or these three astrologers, philosophers, scientists (sorry, the Bible doesn’t call them “kings.”) When they went back to their own country, what did they do with this experience they had just had? Did they just show travel pictures to their friends and tell stories about funny things that happened along the way there and back again? Did their lives change when they got home, or did they just go back to normal?

We don’t know. Here’s what we do know. Some of the most ancient Christian communities in the world are found in Turkey, Iran,

Iraq, Syria and Ethiopia. Some of them still exist as worshipping communities, albeit in challenging circumstances. Stories are told about the followers of Jesus who, after the Resurrection, traveled far and wide, like Thomas going to India, to tell the story of Jesus and to found churches. Could it be that they encountered communities of people receptive to their message because, 30–40 years earlier, they had heard a leader in their community tell a story about a journey and a baby? A star and the evil King who wanted to destroy the child? Could it be that one of those magi (and in Turkey they claim there were actually 12 of them; we have no idea how many there were, only that there were three kinds of gifts) was still alive and immediately knew the story they were hearing from a traveling follower of Jesus had to do with the baby they saw in Bethlehem? Could it be that the speed with which the Christian message spread had to do with the ground already being prepared by those magi and their followers?

I don't know for sure, but I find it hard to believe that they returned home and just went back to normal. When you have been in an encounter with God; when you have been in a situation of risk and trusted in the holy to guide you and the holy does, you find yourself changed in ways you could not have predicted. Going back to normal simply isn't satisfying anymore.

As this year begins, I have heard and read so many people saying that they just “want to get back to normal.” Unlike the Magi, we did

not volunteer for the journey we have taken this year. No one's calendar read "struggle through a pandemic" on January 1, 2020.

But we have been on a journey, nonetheless. I can't speak for you, but I have found over these past months that I have encountered the holy over and over and over again. In big ways and small ways; in people I know and in people who are strangers to me; in gifts given to me and gifts I felt compelled to give. Yes, I would like to stop having to wear a mask, and I would like to feel free to hug my mother, and I would like to be able to sing with others and to travel without fear, and I would like to trust that someone I know who gets the flu will get better without having to go to the hospital.

But I think I have gone past wanting everything to go back to "normal." Normal last January looked like black and brown men, women and children being killed by police, and others, without cause and without justice. Normal looked like leaders blaming the poor for their poverty and enriching their already rich friends. Normal looked like taking relationships for granted far too often. Normal looked like hate groups being empowered.

Parts of normal were good, like singing and hugging, but way too many parts of normal were not good.

Can we go back to our country by another road, perhaps? A road that will help us hold onto some of what we have learned in this past year? Can we not forget too quickly the struggle and suffering so that we may do what we can to keep that struggle and suffering from happening the same way again? What might your new normal look like?

Many years ago, the great poet and theologian Howard Thurman wrote a Christmas poem. It has been repeated and memed so often that I haven't used it for years, feeling like everyone had heard it. But this year, it feels like Thurman needs to speak to us again. This feels like the work of 2021, during and after the pandemic. Let us not go back to normal, beloved. Let us return to our country by a different road.

The Work of Christmas Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among brothers [and sisters],
To make music in the heart.