

Home By Another Way

Gathering

Create a space for worship - perhaps with a small table with a bible, cross and candle.

*This week, it would be appropriate to find a **white cloth** or scarf to signify that we are in a time of “celebration”. Take some deep breaths as you gather your thoughts towards God.*

Light Candle

We light a candle to centre us and to draw us towards Christ.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Acknowledgement of Country

I was once asked to introduce myself by saying my name, the land on which I was born and the land on which I now reside. I had to look it up and when asked I didn't see the great significance.

However, over time I have learnt that it is important to acknowledge those who have resided, cared for and lost the land they once knew. It is important to acknowledge also that God was with them, in their roaming, in their moving through the seasons, in their gathering and living in community.

My name is Meredith Yabsley and I was born on the land of the Kumeyaay native American peoples of Escondido California, I reside on the land of the Wodi-Wodi people of the Dharawal nation. It is important to acknowledge that from earliest times, God put His Spirit into this land and we acknowledge those who have cared for it, through those generations to this— we acknowledge their Elders, past present and emerging as brothers and sisters in Christ caring for this land for our future generations.

Call to Worship

We come to this place -

each of us on our own path.

The path is winding,

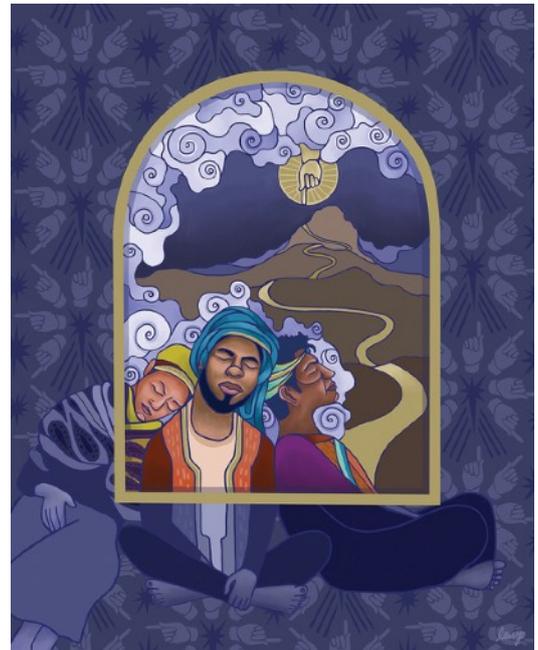
and the path is not always clear,

and the path changes, but we are here.

God is walking us home.

What a gift it is to not walk alone.

Let us worship Holy God.



The Wise Men's Dream | Lauren Wright Pittman

Call to Confession

I imagine that, for the Magi, walking to Bethlehem was not easy. I imagine that following a star for navigation was definitely not easy. However, I imagine that the hardest part might have been not knowing where the road would lead. Friends, we are not always the best versions of ourselves when we are faced with uncertainty or changing plans. Facing the unknown pulls on every ounce of our anxiety and fear. It rings all our stress alarms and can erode our patience, our calm, our sense of perspective. Fortunately for us, we worship a God who is gracious beyond imagination and meets us on every twist and turn of the road home. So let us pray together now, knowing that even in our worst moments, we are held by God.

Prayer of Confession

God of changed plans, The Magi heard in a dream that they were to take a new way home—a different path, an untraveled road. And to our amazement, they did just that. The Magi packed their bags and went home by another way. We wish that change could be easy for us, but more often than not, when whispers of change come, we tend to clench our fists and hold on tighter. Forgive us for resisting change that might be holy. Forgive us for ignoring that there is more than one road home. Forgive us for failing to hear your invitation. Guide our steps to unfamiliar places. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Words of Forgiveness

No matter which roads we take in this one wild and precious life, God walks with us. God never leaves our side. When the road changes and we find ourselves on a new path home, God is always there. So hear and believe this good news:

***No matter where we go,
no matter what we do,
we are claimed, loved, and held by God.
Thanks be to God for a love like that.***

Listening for God's Voice

Prayer for Illumination

Holy God, You speak to us in Scripture and in prayers, in sunrises and sunsets, in friends and in strangers, in dreams and in songs. You are speaking all the time, and how often do we miss it? Still our minds so that we can listen with a depth that we have not heard before. Still our hearts so that we can receive with open arms what it is you are offering us today. We know you are speaking, so we are listening. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.'³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, '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.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

For the Word of God in Scripture,
for the Word of God among us,
for the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God!

Reflection

The story of the arrival of the Wise Ones, Kings, Men...marks the end of Advent. The thing which we have all waited for, with expectancy and excitement is now here, but God has something else for us.

It is not just the birth of his own son, together with a sky full of singing angels and a bright star, it is not just the acknowledgement of the arrival of the Messiah to the Jewish people, as with Simeon and Anna, in Luke 2, it includes the arrival of those holy ones from the east, who travelled a great distance to follow that star and find the new king. This is an announcement to the rest of the world that the long awaited, anointed one has arrived.

The Advent material we've been using, "Close to Home," offers a theme for this week – "Home by another way". Let me read from the commentary by Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri, an author of our Advent material.

“The arrival of the Magi—Persian priests and astrologers from the East—at the birth of Jesus reminds us, once again, of the company God gathers to witness and worship the Christ child. Non-Jews, foreigners, outcast shepherds, strangers, unwed parents—these are the people who come to celebrate God in flesh. Herod, representing imperial power and violence, is kept away.

“The birth of Jesus announced God’s kin-dom, and he was worthy of their gifts, their honour, and their loyalty. Having been warned in dreams not to go back to the palace, the Magi defied Herod’s order and returned home by another way. We have travelled together and now the star has stopped. Wherever the Spirit is leading, know you are loved, and that God is with you, always close to home.”

Wherever the Spirit is leading, you are loved and that God is with you, always close to home...and for the wise ones it meant a plan B, home by another way.

Reading through his commentary on Matthew 2, William Barclay quotes ancient writers who describe a wide spread yearning for a new king, a new regime. It was not just Roman authors but also Jewish and Persian historians who wrote about the world being ready and waiting for a new King. Into this widespread yearning, those who studied the stars, who watched the orderly progress of the heavens through their seasons, saw a new star. The arrival of a new star was the announcement of the birth of a new king.

Within the nativity story, it is logical and we mostly understand why the wise ones went to the palace and met with Herod when looking for the new king. What is harder to understand is why those same wise ones don’t question who it was they have found, when they found Jesus, they just knew. When finding that baby, in meagre surroundings, they worshipped him, (knelt before the new king), and offered him extravagant gifts.

They don’t question who this baby is, they don’t scratch their heads thinking this can’t be right, they don’t balk at the idea of this peasant child, born to unwed parents, being a king. In the same way, when warned in a dream not to return to Herod but to return home by another way, they don’t question or balk at the idea. They moved to Plan B.

I’ve thought a bit about what that means, home by another way... While I am a great contingency thinker, I know I don’t go well when my plans need to change. I can change them, but I am seldom great about having to change them. Home by another way means thinking about another route and one which may not be as safe or secure as the first and it may take longer or require a different set of supplies to make the trek. This is panic territory for most of us, more expense, more time, more effort required.

These wise ones didn’t panic, they didn’t think this was all a mistake. Led by God, they received that message in confidence and with assurance, that same assurance that allowed them to kneel in a dusty, animal filled stable and offer their adoration, and their gifts, to a new born baby.

Do we do that? Do we step out into something new, led by God?

If nothing else, these past two years should have taught us that not even the most predictable of things are so...we’ve had birthdays alone, weddings postponed, new

family as yet unseen and endless rounds of nasal swabbings (or as my family describe it brain swabbing). But in saying that how many of you have learned to use the Services NSW app on your phone? How many of you didn't think you could?

In the package of resources for our Advent materials there was a poem set out for today called Muscle Memory, written by Rev Sarah Speed and based on Matt 2: 1-12.

In this poem, the writer is asking us to consider what we do in the light of God's plan for the whole world – a plan which includes justice with safety for all and paving a way for justice and truth, making a way which includes a space for grace and inclusion.

Muscle Memory

Going home is a form of muscle
memory.
Start the car.
Turn on the lights.
Turn left,
turn right.
Pass the big oak tree
and the empty school yard.
Look for the house with the light on.
Look for the house with the open
door.
Look for the house that says,
"Welcome home."
You'll know when you've arrived—
that's the thing about muscle
memory.

But I am learning things of love,
and home is not home unless all are
welcomed,
and muscle memory is not justice
unless all are safe.
So I'm asking -
can we start the car
and get totally lost
chasing what is right
far off on the horizon?

Can we drive off the road
and get a flat tire
if it means paving the way
for justice and truth?

Can we circle the trees
and miss the school yard completely
if this new way home
includes space for grace?

Can we waste our time
driving in circles
if it gives us time
to add people to the car?

I am learning,
muscle memory and faith
are not one and the same.

So I am asking,
Will you start the car?
Will you turn on the lights?
Will you take a deep breath?

It might be time to get lost.
It might be time to find a new way
home.

*Poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed
Sanctified Art, Close to Home*

She's asking us if we do things by rote or by muscle memory? Do we allow ourselves to be led by God on new and different paths, do we seek a new way home or do the old same thing? (Pause)

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus – to these dearly beloved faithful people and he reminded them that God had revealed himself in the person of Jesus on the road to Damascus. God revealed a secret held since the beginning of time. That secret was

not just for the Ephesians then but for us now, for our neighbours, for family and friends, for whole communities, whole nations, all people;

“For he chose us in him before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his children through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will – to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.”

The wise ones who came to greet the baby Jesus remind us of God’s announcement to the whole world, that we all are welcome to the stable, welcome to kneel at the manger and offer ourselves, our gifts to the new born king.

The poet reminds us that meeting Jesus will mean that we don’t just respond in the usual way, muscle memory, but that led by God it may be time to get lost, it may be time to find a new way home and all that we will experience. Amen

Responding

Prayers of the People

God of The Way, We all have roads we travel.

We travel emotional roads - the narratives we tell ourselves, the mental places we revisit again and again, the assumptions and the fears we know by heart.

Then there are physical roads - the places in our lives that we walk every day, grocery stores and coffee stands, subways and carpool lines.

And then there are roads of our society - the paths carved out that we are expected to follow, dress and etiquette, education and rules, so many things unspoken, but built in stone all the same.

So today we remember the Magi - who travelled, who knows how long, down a dusty road to get to you.

Holy God, we too want to be people that travel mental, physical, and cultural roads to get to you. We want to gather in your sanctuary.

We want to remember you in our prayers.

We want our hearts to know the way home, the way back to you, by perfect memory.

Help us get to that place, for we long to be journeying toward you.

In addition to the road the Magi travelled to you, we also remember the road they took home - a road home by another way.

So, God, when the world cries out for violence and vengeance, show us that road - show us home by another way.

And when the world cries out in scarcity and fear, show us that road - show us home by another way.

And when we find ourselves on a path that could hurt us, show us that road - show us home by another way.

God we are walking.

This life is a journey.

Be in our steps, that we might be led to you.

Be in our eyes, that we might see you.

Be in our hearts, that we might be brave enough to go home by another way.

Now with the confidence of children, we pray together, saying...
Our Father... *Continue with the Lord's Prayer in the language and wording most familiar to you*

Sending

Benediction

As you leave this service, your service begins:

Comfort the homesick.

Open your doors to others.

Seek sanctuary.

Be brave enough to go home by another way.

And remember that here in this place, all are welcomed—so come back soon.

Benediction by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

In the name of our Foundation—God, Spirit, and Son— go in peace. Amen

Meredith Yabsley

2 January 2022