

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Epiphany, Matthew 2:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

They left for their own country by another road.

Tonight we kick off a season of stars, of light, of signs and wonders; yet this is such a dark, menacing story. When I wrote part of this homily yesterday and today, I didn't realize what a dark day today's was going to become. A menacing story for a menacing, frightening day. When I look at footage and photographs, I cannot believe what I'm seeing in our nation's capitol. I can't believe that what I'm seeing is only a couple hours away.

Sue Davis and I took today's reading out of the Christmas Eve pageant a couple of years ago, because it's the Epiphany story, not Christmas Eve. We focused on the beaming angels and tiny sheep and shepherds on Christmas Eve and saved the costumes for the three wise men for this service, where we also hear about King Herod's secret meeting with the wise men, and his threat to "pay homage."

This year we didn't have either pageant because of the pandemic. We had intended to have Hanby and his sons Vaden and Hattan as the three kings this year, but now we find ourselves back to streaming only. No pageant, no singing. Christmas and Epiphany another way.

Another road. They left for their own country by another road.

For as long as I've been ordained, I have heard that church is changing. This has been the topic of countless conferences. *This isn't your fault*, various paid speakers—usually authors of recent books—*this isn't your fault*, they assured us clergy. But they never really said anything that helped me understand what might be next. They talked about the sex lives of sea urchins. I am not making that up: one conference speaker did actually talk about that. Another guy with another book showed a video of some guy dancing in different places. This had something to do with leadership, but obviously the connection didn't stick with me. Church is changing, everyone said, but...so what?

In this first Epiphany, the wise ones followed a star and it led them to the Christ child. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. Then they went into the house and offered him gifts.

Today we use the term "epiphany" to mean some sort of striking insight or understanding. The years of church conferences did not lead me to any epiphanies about what was next for the church.

It took a pandemic for me to grasp that church wasn't just changing: we have changed. What we are doing now is not permanent: me, presiding over the Eucharist to a camera, you with your preconsecrated communion at home. It will not always be like this.

But when the pandemic is passed, we will not go back to church exactly the way it was before. When we were meeting in person again, it was not the same. Eventually, we should be able to

sing and have potlucks again, but this past year has accelerated trends that have been going on for decades. We need to figure out church by another road.

Now most churches, including ours, have some version of livestreaming, although some use Zoom, or some record videos. Such virtual versions of church allow us to reach members who are not able to drive or otherwise have issues getting to church. Sometimes former members who have moved away tune in. Some people watch whom we've never met. Our livestream also allows you—or, *us*, back when I was worshipping on home on disability—it allows us to be flexible about when we worship. We can always watch it later, right?

When we come back fully—when the vaccine has been widely distributed and people feel comfortable taking off their masks and being the same room with others—when we put the missing rows of chairs back, and all of those hymnals back in the pews: when we come back fully, church will still bear some resemblance to this new on-demand reality. Some of us will decide well, we can watch it later...but then later doesn't come. Some of us will grow used to the idea that church is not essential.

Maybe church doesn't seem essential when rioters storm the Capitol building. Is the way we've always done it working? Is there anything else we can do? I am standing in front of you wondering what to do as a church leader in the face of turbulent times like this in our country, other than what I know how to do: read God's word. Reflect on God's word. Preside over the sacraments. Those things are essential. I don't know how church will look in one year or ten, but God's word and sacrament are eternal.

A couple of hours ago I was home with my mouth hanging open, staring at the news, wondering how I was supposed to lead an Epiphany service tonight. But then I thought about tonight's Epiphany story: A star shining in a time of political darkness. A sweet interlude, finding a holy baby. Then home, by another road.

Even though church has changed and is changing, our Christian story is the same. Our church seasons are the same. Lent, when all this pandemic stuff started. Easter, Christ resurrected. The Holy Spirit coming down in Pentecost. Advent with its holy longing. The magic of Christmas, and then these three magi following the star.

Until Ash Wednesday, we will have that star in mind. Where will it lead us? What signs and wonders will we see?