

Singing in the Season: Home by another Way
Matthew 2:1-12
January 1, 2012

Pastor Joshua Sawyer
First Christian Church
Omaha, NE

I'll provide you the lyrics, feel free to shout out the title of the song when you know it...

Shower the People

You can play the game,
and you can act out the part,
but you know it wasn't written for you,
Tell me how can you stand there,
with your broken heart,
afraid of playing the fool,
One thing can be to another,
It don't take any sacrifice,
Oh, Father, and Mother,
Sister and Brother,
If it feels right,
Than don't think twice,
Just shower the people you love with love,

Going to Carolina in My Mind

There ain't no doubt in no one's mind
That loves the finest thing around.
Whisper something soft and kind.
And hey babe the skys on fire.
I'm dying ain't I
Going to Carolina in my mind.

Fire and Rain

Won't you look down upon me Jesus

You got to help me make a stand
You just got to see me through another day
My body's achin' and my time is at hand
And I won't make it any other way

Today we conclude our sermon Series, *Singing in the Season*. The final song that we will look at is *Home by Another Way*, by James Taylor. I don't know if this is true of you, but through the years James Taylor has been a staple to my musical diet. Although there are just over 10 years between his meteoric rise to #3 in the Billboard charts with the album release of *Sweet Baby James*, which contained the hit single *Fire and Rain* in February of 1970 and my birth; his music, like all great music, speaks about pain, loss, hope and love in ways that bridged the divides that separate.

I think at least part of the reason for Taylor's ability to speak with such precision about pain and loss, hope and love stemmed from his own experiences: James Taylor struggled with depression from an early age. Throughout his young adult life he used music, heroin, alcohol, and women to help alleviate the pain of his mental illness. In fact, it was in the 80's when Taylor kicked his drug habit for good after the death of a couple of good friends (one friend being John Belushi) coupled with a desire to be a better father. It was about this time, when Taylor released the album, *Never Die Young* with the song we will hear today, entitled, *Home by Another Way*.

I may be inferring a little too much, but I when I hear the lyrics to this song,

"They tell me that life is a miracle
And I figured that they're right
But Herod's always out there
He's got our cards on file
It's a lead pipe cinch, if we give an inch
Old Herod likes to take a mile
It's best to go home by another way

Home by another way
We got this far to a lucky star
But tomorrow is another day
We can make it another way
Safe home as they used to say
Keep a weather eye to the chart on high
And go home another way"

I image James Taylor looking back at the life he had lived and making a conscious decision to return home without returning to familiar places in order to abuse drugs of various kinds. He had to decide, and as anyone who has struggled with an addiction will tell you, keep deciding, that he was not going to return to places where he would fall prey to familiar habits. James Taylor had to find a new way home. Let us listen to this offering...

Song: Home by Another Way

The lyrics of the song convey to me that James Taylor empathized with the predicament of the wise men. At this point in his life, he decided that he needed to find another way to live; that the old familiar paths that he had traversed were leading him to a short life and robbing him of time with his kids. James Taylor needed a blaze a new trail; He needed a new star to guide him; He needed a dream that would help him to change his course.

Have you ever been in need of such a change? Out of a rut. Out of a bad situation turned worse. Out of hope deferred, love lost. Are the old familiar paths leading you back to difficult and dangerous places?

Let us turn our attention to our Scripture in order to continue to contemplate. Our Scripture today comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew. Many of you will find it to be a familiar tale. It speaks of those Magi, who some call wise men, traveling from the east in order to offer gifts to the one who was to be King of the Jews. Open your ears to hear the word of the Lord...

Scripture: 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, asking, '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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"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." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.' When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Scholar Rita Nakashima Brock and Ann Parker surmise that the point of this passage is blatantly political in nature. The author of Matthew is standing against Rome by announcing that these magicians/astrologers, a profession Rome outlawed, from Persia, that unconquerable eastern world that alluded Rome's control, discovered the King of the Jews in a cradle in a manger in Rome's own land; thus revealing Rome's incompetency, announcing that Rome did not dictate

what happened in the world, exposing the fact that Caesar was not the Son of God, a phrase Emperors used with regularity at that time in history.

James Taylor acknowledges the political nature of the passage in his Song, *Home by Another Way*, when he states that "We should steer clear of royal welcomes and avoid be to-do's because the King who would slaughter the innocents won't cut a deal for you."

It must have been at least a little enticing for the magi to return to King Herod. For to return to the King would have not merely curried good favor, but a return would have been accompanied with lavish gifts, opportunities, prestige; that is, if the King was honorable and trustworthy to not hide the scandal which was to take place (the killing of an innocent child).

I wonder how often we have been enticed to follow the familiar way through devious king's courts that leads to the demise of the defenseless. Will this be the year we chose an alternative path? That we can call a spade a spade; recognizing that we don't have to return to those who intend to harm us or others we love; that we can choose to travel another way so that we can be a part of sharing the peace, hope, and love of God with those who most need it and are willing to receive it.

What is the path that you will take this year?

In this vein of thought I have one more offering for you to consider. It is a poem by Joyce Rupp, entitled *Old Maps No Longer Work*. As you listen I encourage you to think about the old paths that you have taken, that have led to meaningless wilderness, dull and futile life, a dark night of the soul.

Old maps no longer work – by Joyce Rupp

I keep pulling it out -
the old map of my inner path.

I squint closely at it,
trying to see some hidden road
that maybe I've missed,
but there's nothing there now
except some well-travelled paths.
they have seen my footsteps often,
held my laughter, caught my tears.

I keep going over the old map
but now the roads lead nowhere,
a meaningless wilderness
where life is dull and futile.

"toss away the old map," she says
"you must be kidding!" I reply.
she looks at me with Sarah eyes
and repeats, "toss it away.
it's of no use where you're going."

"I have to have a map!" I cry,
"even if it takes me nowhere.
I can't be without direction."
"but you are without direction,"
she says, "so why not let go, be free?"

so there I am – tossing away the old map,
sadly fearfully, putting it behind me.
"whatever will I do?" wails my security
"trust me" says my midlife soul.

no map, no specific directions,
no "this way ahead" or "take a left".
how will I know where to go?

how will I find my way? no map!
but then my midlife soul whispers:
“there was a time before maps
when pilgrims travelled by the stars.”

it is time for the pilgrim in me
to travel in the dark,
to learn to read the stars
that shine in my soul.
I will walk deeper
into the dark of my night.
I will wait for the stars.
trust their guidance.
and let their light be enough for me.

It is time for us to begin our journey home. It is time for us to learn to read the stars again. We need not fear the dark of night, for there are plenty of stars to guide us shining in our midst.

My friends, this is a new year. May this be the year that you go home by another way, a way that looks out for those who are in need of your generosity, a way that attends to God’s dream of peace, hope and love shared between us, a way that attends to the bright stars that shine within your own soul. There is another way home. Amen.