

Second Sunday in Christmas  
January 2, 2022  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Psalm 84:1-8  
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a  
Matthew 2:1-12

John Shea, a Roman Catholic priest and preacher and storyteller, makes the point that we really don't know about the magi. There are so many questions we cannot answer:

... where exactly in the East did they come from? how could Herod have assembled the chief priests and the scribes? why did Herod ever let them go? what type of star was it? what happened to the gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

But he doesn't really care about all that:

Our concern is not with the scarcity of historical data but with the abundance of poetry and story. If the Magi reduce historical reason to silence, they thrill the artistic imagination to song. Where the historian legitimately equivocates, the poet and storyteller expound. <sup>i</sup>

Think of the O. Henry story, "The Gift of the Magi" – even if it is only loosely tangential to the biblical story. Why do we give the gifts we give? What gives them the value we ascribe to them.

And then there's the classic poem by T. S. Eliot, beginning with these memorable lines:

"A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter."

Those lines resonate: partly because it's cold right now; partly because of the point he makes, that the spiritual quest is not all rainbows and unicorns.

And they resonate especially now, I think, as we contemplate entering a new year with COVID. If life seems hard, there may yet be value for us to discover in the way the road ahead leads us.

James Taylor sang about the magi and their journey. Picking up on the last verse of this morning's gospel – "they left for their own country by another road" – he called it "Home By Another Way." He begins the song this way:

Those magic men the Magi, some people call them wise  
or Oriental, even kings.  
Well anyway, those guys, they visited with Jesus,  
they sure enjoyed their stay.  
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme,  
they went home by another way.

While T. S. Eliot imagines the challenges of the journey *to* Bethlehem, James Taylor focuses on the hard journey back home again. And James Taylor strikes an optimistic note:

Maybe me and you can be wise guys too  
And go home by another way

We need not worry much about what really happened. It's enough to delight in the story, trusting that telling it is enough, that our reflections bear fruit. That's the point John Shea made:

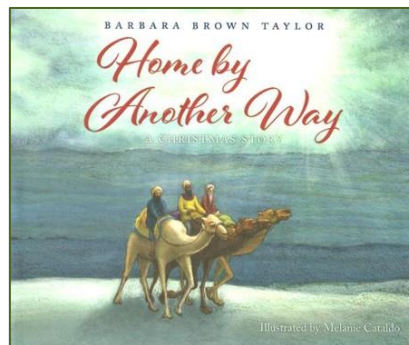
Our concern is not with the scarcity of historical data but with the abundance of poetry and story.

And with that, let me tell you the story again. Or, more to the point, let me share the retelling of the story as Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and preacher and storyteller, has told it. In 1999, she published a book of sermons entitled *Home By Another Way*. One of the sermons in that book was also called "Home By Another Way."<sup>ii</sup>

And then, in 2018, she reworked her sermon into a picture book for children, also called *Home By Another Way*. That's the version of the story I want to read for you this morning. (Though it's ostensibly written for children, it is virtually word for word identical to the original story she told in her sermon from the 90s.)

I should allow that she takes a bit of poetic license in retelling Matthew's story. It's a storyteller's prerogative. And a poet's. And a preacher's, too, it seems.

Here's her story ...<sup>iii</sup>



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<sup>i</sup> John Shea, "The Magi Ride Again," in *Starlight: beholding the Christmas miracle all year long* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, NY, 1996), p. 129.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Home By Another Way," in *Home By Another Way* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Mass.; 1999), pp. 27-31.

In the sermon, Taylor echoes (and expands on) the comments of John Shea (quoted above), saying, in part:

It is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine, or spend years in the library combing ancient texts. There is another way home. You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true. If you are in any doubt, it is always a good idea to watch other people who have listened to the story – just pay attention to how the story affects them over time. Does it make them more or less human? Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase their capacity for joy?

<sup>iii</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Flyaway Books, Louisville, Kentucky, 2018).