

### *Taking Another Road*

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*, that staple of middle-school poetry memorization, sprung to mind this week as I considered the story of the Magi... of course, the story of the Magi is only part of the story. There is a larger story, a tragic story, that marks the birth of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel narrative. It is not simply the story of three kings visiting Jesus with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (Their royalty, as well as their names, are later additions to the text, non-Biblical wanderings of the imagination by Wordsworth and others, adding color to the story.) No, it is also the story of a murderous tyrant and a family fleeing for their lives in fear.

We don't know much about Jesus's life then... we know almost nothing about the wise men.

But we know a little bit about Herod, though. We know he's a despot. We know he is morally weak. And plenty of flights of fancy will fill in the gaps for us if we wish to look.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of what the wise men (if they even *were* all men) found when they made their way to Herod's palace, "...the king they met was something of a disappointment. He was old and fat and he had terrible breath. His skin was yellow, as if his bile had gotten the best of him... Without even conferring with one another, the wise men knew he was not the one, so they asked him if he knew of any other kings in the general area."<sup>1</sup>

What a difference it might have made if they had never asked!

But there are some moves, once taken, some paths once embarked upon, that can't be undone. The bell can't be un-rung. The toothpaste is on the counter, and it's not going back in the tube. Choose your analogy, but the truth remains: actions have consequences.

The choosing of a different path is as much a core a value of Christianity as I can imagine, but even correcting course does not erase what has been done.

I know this is the first Sunday of a new year. We're all flush with resolutions if we're going to make them. Even if we don't, a new year presses the reset button on so much of life: a new deductible for insurance, a new tax year for business and personal life, a new congress for those

---

<sup>1</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way* (Cowley, Cambridge, 1999) p29

who watch such things... everything is new. And the church tells us, as well it should, that our lives can be new also.

And they can. Taking a different road is a vital part of Christian Faith... we can lay down our guilt. We can lay down our mistakes. We can chart a new course. The only problem is it just doesn't get rid of the consequences of our actions. Another path lies before us:

Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim,  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same,

How often is it the case that the two paths, or three or four, that we consider look so very similar? Indeed, it is possible for two paths to look nearly the same.

If you stand on the top of Dun-I, a rocky hill on the island of Iona in Scotland, there is a view that is unlike anywhere else in this world. You look out over the ocean, off to the one side is the Isle of Mull, and then over just a little further off in the distance is Staffa. Dutchman's Cap is still further west, and if you walk to the west just a very little bit (and there's only a little bit to walk upon) there is a fairy pool that is always full of crystal-clear water because it's always raining in Scotland... It's absolutely captivating.

I've always climbed up the same way each time. The path is worn into the hillside, it's boggy and it's rocky, and you don't wear your good shoes for this trip because it starts by wandering through a sheep pasture. But when you get to the top, all the paths down look the same. It is deeply tempting to take a different path down the hill, which is like a little mountain in its topography. Who wouldn't want to take in even more scenery in this landscape that is drunk with beauty?

But here is what I learned by taking the other paths down... one ends in a drop-off. Without climbing gear and considerable skill, it's a dead end. The other winds through stinging nettles and requires considerably greater skill and athleticism to navigate. I've done that path one time, and it involved scraped palms and a muddy backside as I slid down the hill. I've come to believe the only reason these paths are worn into the hill is because people climb down as far as they can, realize that the paths are not the same, and climb back up to the top and take the safe way down.

Living in a time that seems to be struggling with moral ambiguity, sometimes the paths look the same. And it's only by discernment that we learn that they are not the same.

It is when the paths look the same that so many wrong turns are made.

Just as we can't undo the consequences of our actions, neither can we pretend our actions have no value. Ideas, theories, systems... these may be value neutral. But actions can't. They are by definition morally significant.

To be clear, every action isn't the moral equivalent of hiding a victim or being a sympathizer, but all actions have moral value.

Have you seen the NBC program *The Good Place*? It's actually making moral reasoning cool again. The premise is that every action is either basically good or bad... the only thing that varies is the value of the action. And again, I want to be very clear: God does not use a point system to rank us in order to determine whether we are in or out of the kingdom... but our actions *do* have moral value.

What difference might it have made for the magi to ignore the vision and go back the way they came? I can't imagine the scenery changes that much in the desert. Why not just sneak back out the most direct route? What difference would it even make? Well, the holy family barely escaped and the rest of the story in Matthew tells the sad history of Herod's quixotic rage and the wake of destruction it left. How we wish sometimes we could go back and take a different path:

And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

Just as we can't undo what has been done, and just as we must acknowledge that our actions have value, there is another truth that comes around whether we like it or not: life can't be lived backwards. Time moves in only one direction, unless you are God, and I'm more than a little reticent to attempt to describe God's relationship to time other than to say that "eternal" isn't the same as a really long time, or even forever. But for us temporal beings, who live in Chronos, the story is always moving, a reality that is called to mind at times such as the turn of a year.

Almost never are we offered a do-over in life. We don't get a do-over on a marriage, we don't get a do-over on our children's childhood, or their education. Rarely are we offered a do-over on the paths we take...but a do-over and redemption are not the same thing, and that's also a core value of Christian faith. Redemption is at the heart of what we affirm with our faith.

Have you ever had that moment where someone offered a kind word at exactly the moment you were down in the dumps? The kind word doesn't change whatever happened to make you down in the dumps in the first place, but it *does* change perspective. It can even change your mood. Now, that is just a small and imperfect analogy for redemption but this is what we are trying to say: Redemption doesn't change the past... it changes the future.

There is no version of the Gospel story as related by Matthew that doesn't include the destructive rage of Herod. It is a fact of the story. Herod orders murder, Mary and Joseph flee from Israel as refugees to Egypt, and there they stay until they learn that Herod is dead. They escape, but others don't. There is tremendous collateral damage that sweeps like a destructive wake behind the visit of the magi.

It's a terrible story. Thank God the Gospel doesn't end there, just as we thank God that the Gospel doesn't end on Good Friday, or even on Saturday, but only after Easter morning, with its good news of the resurrection. And note this: the resurrection doesn't change what happened on Good Friday. No, it's God's *redemption* of the tragedy of the Cross. The resurrection changes the future, not the past. The paths we take make a difference in our lives and others:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.<sup>2</sup>

What we're really saying is that choices matter. That seems to be such a clear message from the text of the day... it makes a difference which path we follow. It matters if we hurt one another. It matters if we are kind to one another. I'm not sure that gets said often enough, and if the church isn't saying it, then who will?

To each of our lives, in whatever measure grace is needed, it matters whether there is someone who will speak that redemptive word to us. And we should consider the moments when God calls us to speak a redemptive word to the situation that we are in. And, likewise with actions (though words are certainly actions) there are things that we are called to do to work with Jesus Christ for redemption of the world, and whether or not we do them in large measure determines whether we are taking another road or staying on not so much the path of moral failure, but rather, simply the path of moral mediocrity that allows us to blunder on year after year, not realizing the deprivation wreaked by our spiritual droughts.

Oh, the magi could have gone home the way they came, but then the story would have been different, wouldn't it? That's really the invitation of the Gospel: to change the course of the story; to change the story for good, for love.

One final thought: I know full well that course changes can be unpredictable and sometimes it will take not once or twice, but many times to change course. And so, I want to offer a word of encouragement for those moments when we have tried and failed, when life seems dull, or when the politics of personal destruction win out yet again, as well as for the moments when the future looms full of uncertainty and we aren't at all sure that the path we have chosen is the right one. In those moments, remember this: in the final estimation, through the grace of Jesus Christ all paths ultimately lead home. Home is that place where we are always welcome, where the meal is set out with a place at the table for everyone.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44272/the-road-not-taken>