

One of intern Matthew's duties was to chaperone the youth group on their annual summer trip to a regional Youth Gathering.

He boarded a bus with twenty some youth and other adult chaperones. He called at the end of the week to fill me in on the trip. "We left one behind," he said. "You did what?" "We left one of the kids behind" "Matthew, you can't be serious. You'll never get a job this way!"

But he was serious. He described the scene when he returned to the bus after having had lunch. People were gathering in what appeared to be somewhat of a frenzy. Turns out they had just made the discovery that Chris wasn't with them. They were replaying the video of the morning that recorded their leaving. Chris was in the group picture before leaving but no one had seen him at lunch. As kids continued to turn up from their lunch break, Chris didn't turn up.

So, the phone calls began, and indeed Chris had been left behind.

Well, as it turns out, Chris's father had bought him a plane ticket, and Chris beat the group home. And, believe it or not, Matthew did get a job after seminary.

The following summer I set off with the youth group to attend the gathering. The theme that year was "Home by Another Way."

Yes, it's true, "Home by Another Way." The kids thought it was the funniest thing and spent the whole time trying to figure out which kid would go home by another way that year. Luckily, at the end of the week, we all went home by bus.

This sermon isn't actually about bus trips or youth gatherings or leaving kids behind. It's about what that summer youth conference was about: epiphanies, moments when God's light shines into our lives and we leave different than before—we go home by another way.

That's where we find ourselves today. The Christmas tree is still here. Baby Jesus has arrived in the crèche. Mary and Joseph seem to be doing OK. So now we await the wise men. They come from the East, bringing with them gifts, rich gifts of frankincense and myrrh and gold. King Herod sends them to find the child so that they can report back and King Herod, too, can visit.

They arrive—and what would an Epiphany sermon be without an old joke: Had the wise men been women, they would have brought practical gifts—a casserole or two—and helped clean up, and being women they surely would have asked for directions and shown up on time.

But the wise men do arrive, and there they find the babe and something happens to them—a moment of epiphany happens.

When they saw the place where the star had stopped and the baby lying in the manger, they were overwhelmed with joy. And then came their dream and a warning not to return to Herod. It turns out that Herod had planned to come and lay harm to this new one.

And so, the wise men departed for their own country by another road.

Epiphany. Light shining in the darkness. New awarenesses. New realities. Change in plans. Home by a different way. It's what this Epiphany celebration is all about, and it seems that at this point, our secular calendar and our church calendar merge right at the same point. We come to a new year, having been to the stable and seen the light, and ask, "What now?"

For some of us, it's an easy answer but for others a not-so-easy. For many of us, we will return to our lives as they were last year —our jobs, our schools, our immediate families, whatever it was that we were doing despite Covid, before we headed off for Bethlehem. For some that's hard, and for some that's easy.

And yet, today's reading is to inspire us to return by a different way, to recognize we are different. We may return to our lives as they were, but we will be different, for despite not having celebrated the way we used to, we have seen the Christ child; and we have experienced the great blessing of giving; we have been given the promise of hope for tomorrow.

We can't walk away unchanged. We've received the light, and now it's our turn to share, to move forward in this new year assured that God continues to lead, that century after century God has a plan for this world, for this congregation, for your life. It is our job to live in the light, to embrace the new little one born in a stable, born to bring new things, and to listen to God's voice as we move into yet a new year.

Anthony knew about living in the land of darkness. He rang the church doorbell at my congregation in New York and asked for help, help getting away from gang life. The day he rang the doorbell Anthony was ordered by his general to eliminate a rival. He said, "Yes, sir." But on the way, suddenly out of the blue he screamed, "No!"

He wandered around, scared and uncertain, until he saw a church and rang the bell. He doesn't know exactly why, but he's now pretty sure God had something to do with it. He spent ten hours in the church hiding and then one of the council members drove him to the airport and we purchased him a ticket. Light shone on him that day and Epiphany happened. Anthony went home by another way.

Sometimes the moments of Epiphany are dramatic ones, and other times they are subtle. No matter how dramatic or undramatic, you can be sure they happen. Sometimes we are waiting and listening attentively, and sometimes we are so totally absorbed in our own worries and thoughts that we are caught off guard. But, no matter where you might be found, you can trust that in your life, moments of discovery happen over and over again.

There are those moments of Epiphany that enlighten our everyday experiences, that help us to see the goodness of the world, to see the best in those that surround us daily in our lives, to count our blessings, to give thanks for those who love us. Sometimes they're big moments, and sometimes they are new little insights, but all of them are important, for they are God's light shining in our lives.

So, what now? It's time to share that light. Just as the wise men came bearing their gifts, it's time for you to share your gifts and to believe that as you travel the familiar roads to God, that you, too, might go home by another way.
Amen.