7/14-15/18 Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 2:1-15 Detour Road Signs Series

In the summer of 1993, I decided to attend the wedding of one of my sorority sisters in Bucyrus, Ohio. Looking at the paper map, prior to GPS, I decided to drive from Franklin to Springfield then take Route 4 to Bucyrus. According to the map, that route made sense. But what the map could not tell me was that day I would encounter 3 detours, including one in some small town for a fireman’s festival.

I barely made it in time for the wedding. And yes, I traveled home by other roads—Route 30 to I-75.

When have you ever encountered an unexpected detour during your travels or road trips? Sometimes the detour may be for construction. At other times it may be for an accident. In Northwest Ohio the detours that most often popped up were for culvert repairs or flooded roads. Culvert repair detours often gave enough warning to travel by another road, although they often followed the state routes and took drivers miles out of the way. Road closed signs for flooding, however, would randomly pop up, without any detour signs, so drivers had to create their own detours, which often involved a U-turn or two.

On this journey we call life, how often have you encountered an unexpected detour, one forced upon you by life’s circumstances, or one you have willingly embarked upon through your own choices? If we are honest this morning, all of us have encountered a detour or two or ten along life’s journey.

Pink slips. Cancer. Divorce papers.

An unexpected move. A new child. An empty house.

Natural disasters. Car troubles. Sudden tragedy.

Adventure. Denial. Determination.

How well have you navigated such detours? Is your personality such that a detour messes with your sense of control? Is your personality such that a detour is just another speed bump to overcome? Or have you learned, in spite of your natural tendencies, that detours are a part of life to be navigated?

In the midst of your detours, where do you find God? Where do you experience God? Or are you one who struggles to believe that God is with you?

This weekend, we continue to ponder common road signs that we encounter in the midst of daily life and faith. And our Scripture today reminds us that no matter what detours we face in life—unexpected sorrow or anticipated celebration—God is with us.

That is not only the message of Christmas, where we most often hear this passage. That is also the message of the entire Bible. God is with us. On mountaintops. In valleys. Beside still waters. In the midst of the storms of life.

God is with us.

The Gospels are the unique stories of God with us in the presence of Jesus, God in the flesh in the real and raw reality of our world. In telling the story of Jesus’ birth, Matthew and Luke are very different. One shares the story of angels and shepherds. One shares the story of magi and angelic dreams. Yet they both share the wonder of Jesus’ birth, as well as a theme of movement. In these Gospels, no one who encounters Jesus remains still. They either seek to follow or turn away in rejection. In the Christmas story every character is a traveler, often due to unexpected detours.

Joseph and Mary have to detour to Bethlehem close to her due date for the mandatory government census. Shepherds leave the flocks in their fields by night to detour into Bethlehem to find the child celebrated by an angel chorus. Magi observe a new star on the horizon and detour out of their normal routines to follow the star and find the newborn King. They are also warned to detour around Jerusalem on the way home. Then Joseph and Mary, instead of returning to their hometown, detour to Egypt, to flee the wrath of King Herod.

Go beyond the Christmas story, and many more of our faith ancestors are found to be on the move. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Joseph. Moses.

The people of Israel in the wilderness. Exiled leaders and the return of a faithful remnant. Disciples of Jesus sent out 2 by 2. Paul and his missionary journeys.

Rarely in faith or in life do we remain still. Change is a part of life. Businesses adapt or fade away. Families grow then shrink. Churches adapt programming to reach new generations.

Sometimes we change by our own choosing. Sometimes we change due to detours enacted by others.

We are all called to be travelers on the journey of life. Sometimes our travels will literally take us halfway around the world, such as the life of military service; sometimes our travels are more relational, challenging us to move deeper into our understanding of others when we remain in the same town or city all our lives.

We are also all called to be travelers on the journey of faith, as followers of Jesus.

To follow Jesus means to live by faith, and to go where that faithfulness leads us.

Sometimes that is down a straight and narrow path. Sometimes that faith journey begins with a drastic U-turn. Sometimes faith calls us to detour from the road we were on. Yet no matter where we go when we follow Jesus—to our neighbors, friends and colleagues, or to countries halfway around the world—the journey will not always take us where we expect to go.

..In 1920, Oswald Smith stood before an examining board for missionaries. This was his dream, his hope, his passion. He would often pray, "Lord, I want to go as a missionary for you. Open a door of service for me." Now, at last, his prayer would be answered. Yet when the examination was over, the board turned Oswald Smith down. He did not meet their qualifications. He failed the test. Oswald Smith had set his direction, but now life gave him a detour. What would he do?

As Oswald Smith prayed, God planted another idea in his heart. If he could not go as a missionary, he would build a church which could send out missionaries. And that is what he did. Oswald Smith pastored The People's Church in Toronto, Canada, which sent out more missionaries than any other church at that time.

Oswald Smith was open to where God lead him to go, and God transformed his detour into a main thoroughfare of service.

 -Adapted from Brian L. Harbour, Rising Above the Crowd, sermonillustrations.com:detour

The Magi never expected to travel to a rural town in Judea to find a baby born “King of the Jews.” They were Gentiles, foreigners, non-believers in the God of Israel. They have been called wise men, kings, astrologers, scholars and magi.

They were men who studied the stars. So when a new star appeared in the sky, they took note of it. And did more than ooh and aah over it.

They decided to follow the star, to journey to find the leader whose birth the star signified, to then offer their gifts, praise and worship.

Yet before the star could stop over the place where the little one lay, these magi took a detour into Jerusalem. They naturally presumed that a great king would be born in a great city. That this baby’s birth would already be well known to the rulers and leaders of the region. How wrong they were!

Only the angels and shepherds understood the significance of this one birth. Most in Bethlehem had no idea the Savior of the world had been born in their midst. Word of the birth had not yet reached Joseph and Mary’s hometown and relatives, let alone the powers in Jerusalem.

So when the magi stopped at Herod’s palace to ask for directions, they unknowingly caused great turmoil. Herod was known as the King of the Jews.

He was ruthless in keeping tight control on his power and authority. Consulting the biblical scholars, Herod found out the prophecy proclaimed a child to be born in backwater Bethlehem. Herod sent the magi on their way with such information, yet also with a promise to return and let Herod know who they found. This was not so that Herod would celebrate with them. Instead, Herod was already plotting his new move, violence against such a threat.

Their detour complete, the magi traveled to rural Bethlehem, where the star stopped over the house where Joseph, Mary and Jesus resided. There, they found God. There, they stopped, offered their costly gifts, and worshipped the infant Jesus.

Having encountered Immanuel, God with us, the magi were warned in a dream to avoid Jerusalem. They risked Herod’s wrath by not returning to the city, wanting no part in his evil scheme. So they detoured once more, going home another way.

This is where our cute Christmas story ends. Yet the Scripture story continues.

I have only preached once in my life on the story that follows the magi, for it was the required text for my ordination paperwork. Verses 13-23 are a jarring passage for the Sunday after Christmas. For when we continue on in the Gospel of Matthew, we come face to face with the raw reality of this world.

There is a reason the rest of Herod’s story is rarely mentioned at Christmas. He turns the story of Christmas from PG to R for violence. He is the epitome of the powers and principalities that want to squash anything good and loving and hopeful and of God in our world.

King Herod was a Jew who ruled the territory of Judea for 33 years, yet he answered to the higher authority of Caesar and the Roman Empire. Even Rome was known to question his sanity, as he was a ruthless, paranoid ruler who violently snuffed out anyone who threatened his power. This included a wife and two sons. This included any insurgents who questioned Roman rule. This also included any babies who dared to be called “King of the Jews.” That was Herod’s title! How dare someone else be called King?

Go home tonight and read the rest of Matthew chapter 2, and you will read why the magi took a detour home and why Joseph became a refugee in Egypt. Once Herod realized the magi were not returning, fearing he had been tricked, he then sent his troops into Bethlehem, to kill every boy child under the age of 2. Not exactly the warm fuzzy story we want to ponder at Christmas, when all we want to focus on is peace and goodwill and gift giving.

The cries of those parents echoed the cries of Rachel long ago, Jeremiah proclaimed, and are still heard today in the cries of parents after every school shooting or every random act of violence or every tragedy that takes innocent lives. I can still remember that the day I brought my Rachel home from the hospital was the day of the Sandy Hook school shooting. I celebrated a new birth as other parents mourned a senseless shooting.

Jesus was born into a world full of ruthless leaders, fearful citizens, and senseless violence. Jesus was born into a world that did not value the lives of women and children and slaves. Jesus was born into a world that was selfish and sinful. Sound familiar today?

This is the world into which Jesus was born. The world in which Jesus came to save. The world into which God proclaims, I am with you. Do not fear.

At this time in his young life, Jesus was at the mercy of others. Yet soon he would grow up to offer mercy to others. At this time in his young life, Jesus was safely whisked away from the cruelty of Herod. He and his parents fled as refugees to Egypt.

If you’ve paid any attention to the news in the past two months, we are currently in our own refugee crisis. Asylum seekers turned away at the border. Children separated from their parents at the border as well as through more local raids.

Families torn apart as paperwork backlogs allow for ICE to deport those still in process.

Ironically, I chose this passage in May prior to when these stories became headline news. What today’s scripture reminds me is that violence has been and always will be. And as long as there is violence, there will be parents scared for their children. As long as there have been ruthless people in power, our world has had a refugee crisis. In WW2 Jews were turned away and Japanese Americans interned. 2 years ago it was Syrian refugees rejected by state governments.

I cannot even begin to fathom how desperate a mother or father must be to risk life, to risk violence, to risk sexual harassment to flee to another country on the hope of a better life for their children. Or to entrust that child to a paid border crosser and pray they make it to a relative in the US without being abused or traumatized.

We are not going to settle our current immigration crisis in church today. Yet as the people of God in this world, we are called to have compassion on the suffering and marginalized, the poor and desperate.

How can we be a voice for the voiceless, keeping pressure on our congress men and women to create a humane updated immigration policy? While we physically cannot assist children in detention centers, how can we continue to assist children in our own community? I am thankful for the ways you already reach out in compassion and care, through our food pantries and Hope House and IHN. What more can we do? What God-directed detours do we need to take in our personal and communal mission and outreach?

When we reach out to the poor and marginalized, the suffering and despairing, we are following Jesus into the world around us. During Jesus’ life and ministry, he was constantly upsetting the status quo by treating women as valued, healing the sick, teaching the ordinary, welcoming the least of these. Consider today that Jesus lived out not only what he believed was God’s kingdom ways, he also lived out what he had experienced as an outsider first in Egypt, then in Nazareth. He knew what it meant to be marginalized. He knew what it meant to not be welcomed. He also knew what it meant to follow God, even to the cross.

Jesus came into the midst of our messed up world, from the manger to the cross to the empty tomb, to remind us once again that God loves us all. And God desires a relationship with us all. And God is with us all. God with us when life is cruising along and God is with us when the road of life is filled with potholes. God with us when we celebrate births and mourn deaths. God with us when compassion is shown and God with us when compassion is in short supply.

God is with us. And in the midst of our messed up world, God calls us to offer a different narrative. We are called to offer an example of God’s kingdom ways here and now. We are called to value all life. We are called to live by faith not fear, forgiveness not revenge, hope not despair, love not hate. This is a counter-cultural narrative that God calls us to live!

And in the midst of everything, as we trust that God is with us, God also calls us to worship. Job never cursed God. Even when all was lost, he clung to faith. Paul landed in prison on more than one occasion. And even in prison, he worshipped God, praised Jesus, and trusted the Holy Spirit.

Our worship does not deny the harsh realities around us. Rather, our worship grounds us in the one who gives us strength to face each day. Our worship reminds us of who and whose we are. Our worship is our defiant yes to a world that questions God’s existence and care.

No, I do not believe God causes evil, yet God allows us free will that chooses evil.

God does not condone the slaughter of innocent children, or the sacrifice of children on the altar of high expectations, but rather weeps with us and reminds us how to love and care for one another.

When we take the wrong road, when we turn away from God, God will call us back, detour us onto the right road, invite us to journey down another road.

Are we willing to trust that God is with us? Are we willing to follow where God leads us? Like the magi before us; Like Abraham and Sarah; Like Joseph and Mary.

May we be open to God-directed detours.

As individuals, as families, and as the body of Christ, there are many ways for us to follow, many ways for us to serve, many ways for us to be examples of faith and hope, love and worship. May we be open to the ways of God on our journeys of faith.

And no matter where our journeys of faith take us, may we leave here today giving thanks for the good news that God is with us.

God is with us. Thanks be to God.