

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

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LATE ARRIVALS (Psalm 72 portions: Matthew 2:1-12)

I am what some people politely refer to as “directionally challenged.” My brother has occasionally wondered aloud “If you walk around the block, do you know which side of the street your house is on when you get back?” It’s not unusual for me to stop and ask for directions. I felt great empathy for the wise men when they stopped in Jerusalem looking for directions to the place where the Christ child lay. They had what I have come to think of as a gas station experience.

Even with a GPS system – notoriously challenging on how it counts exits from “roundabouts” or gives lane directions on ramps, I still find myself asking for directions. While I can get close to my destination, I often hear the system telling me in an annoyed voice that it’s “recalculating” or to “make the first possible legal u-turn”. After fuzzing the target without luck, I’ll stop at a gas station for assistance. I describe what I have been told I am looking for -- say, “the only 6 story building in a block of two story homes, with a large distinctive logo on top.” Almost without exception, the person behind the counter responds, “I am not from around here.” As a result of my poor internal compass, I have honed being “fashionably late” to high art.

The wise men, at their stop in Jerusalem, heard a variation on the gas station theme. People said, “We’re from around here and we don’t know what you are talking about!” The people, the king and the court hadn’t heard of Christ’s birth and were frightened at the changes it meant to their lives. I suspect, too, that they might have been offended that strangers would be the ones to tell them what had happened in their own back yard. They were probably embarrassed, as well. When they checked their own Scriptures, they found that they should have known where the Savior would be born, if not when. So they sent the wise men toward Bethlehem to find the child. With a neat twist, the direction seekers were to become the direction givers, encouraged to return and tell where they found the child. After an undoubtedly longer delay than the wise men had anticipated, they headed the last few miles toward Bethlehem and their goal – seeing the Christ child.

Now, though our creches usually include the three kings at the manger along with the shepherds and angels, according to Scripture they wouldn’t have been there together. The shepherds returned to their fields “that same night” (meaning the night of Christ’s birth); the angels eventually took their hallelujahs heavenward; then came the kings bearing gifts. The liturgical calendar celebrates their arrival 12 days after Christ’s birth, on Epiphany (next Wednesday). More historically based estimates of the time it would have taken for the three to identify the sign of the star, prepare for a trek of that magnitude, and actually make their way across the miles to Bethlehem, suggest that it was unlikely they could have arrived much earlier than Jesus’ second birthday.

While it’s hard to say they were technically “late” at all, because no one at the manger was expecting them, two years after the fact is pushing the envelope on any definition of fashionably late. Yet the wise men kept going. They seemed to care less about when they would arrive, than

that they would arrive at all. There is a certain courageous stick-to-it-tive-ness in that – a faithful commitment to pressing on when one is not sure of the location; when one is not sure of one's welcome; when one is not even sure if what you are going to see will still be there when you get there, or even what is going to look like when you get there. That couldn't have been an easy thing for the wise men to do, but they did it.

A presbytery meeting early in my tenure here was at a location new to me. (Actually, more embarrassingly, it wasn't entirely new – I had been there when I had preached a sermon for the search committee. Key difference: this time I was driving myself.) My GPS and I disagreed about whether I had made a left turn or simply continued on the same route. While we argued, I visited Skaneateles from two different directions, drove through Chittenango repeatedly and recognized that Cazenovia was not where I was going before I got there. An hour and a half after I had left my office I was still thirty miles from the meeting and could figure out no way to get to Morrisville before the meeting was half over. I went home.

Now, admittedly, the appeal of a presbytery meeting vs. that of meeting a new baby, any new baby, let alone a savior, are considerably different... Still I wonder how often, unlike the wise men, we stop short of our journey's goal because we won't arrive at our goal on our originally projected time line – goals far more important than getting to a meeting.

Friday was a traditional day to make New Year's resolutions – to identify positive changes we want to make in our lives – to get more exercise, to eat less, to be more forgiving, to give more generously, to re-prioritize our time, to worship more, teach more, to commit less often but more deeply, to cut back, to add on... whatever we think our lives are needing for more balance and health. Some of us missed that calendar imposed deadline and think we'll wait until next year; and some of us have already missed our newly established goals; and so think we might give up altogether. Some of us are so discouraged we don't even think about starting to reach for more joy, hope or health.

Whether it's New Year's resolutions or other commitments to change activities, relationships or habits, if that's where we are, let's look again at the story of the wise men. While unexpected, and arriving long after the original celebration, the wise men were received not as gatecrashers; not as ones who had thrown off the caterer's count; not as late arrivals who kept the host family at their duties longer than they had intended. No. They were received as welcome guests, their wisdom and gifts to be accepted as though they were among the first wave of admirers.

A few years ago, a friend and I had tickets to *The Nutcracker*. As often happens at this time of year, shifting priorities and commitments meant that we didn't leave when intended. Rather we started the car ten minutes before the curtain was to go up. We went, fully expecting that we wouldn't be seated until the intermission. On our arrival, we were indeed very late. No one was in the lobby, but two ticket takers and over at the door to the hall itself, an usher. She was quite kind. She whispered that she would seat us right away in any old seats and return at intermission to take us to our assigned seats. Flashlight in hand, she led us about a quarter of the way down the aisle and indicated two seats on the edge of the side aisle. As promised, as soon as the lights went up at intermission, she returned to help us find our seats. It's hard to know whether she or we were more surprised. When she looked at our tickets, she saw that, unknowingly, she had already seated us in our real seats.

In the intricate ballet of human relationships
In the theatre of God's love
It is not possible to be late.
There are always seats at this Table;
seats prepared especially for us.
We will not be turned away.
There is no waiting --
no waiting for calendars
or intermissions
no waiting for the God
who is waiting for us with open arms.
New relationships or relationships made new by reconciliation or forgiveness; new careers, new
learning, healing or possibility...
waiting here for us everyday
if we dare to keep watching the star,
dare to keep journeying
and dare to believe that we are indeed welcome.
however
whenever we arrive.