

The Second Sunday after Christmas, Year C  
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
January 2, 202  
Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Psalm 84  
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a  
Matthew 2:1-12

## Home By Another Way

A thousand years ago, on a route that has been in use by various peoples for many thousands of years, a new Christian pilgrimage was born. It is known as the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, or the Way of St James of the Field of Stars. The most popular route stretches some 500 miles across northern Spain to the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela where the bones of St James the Apostle are said to be buried.

Since 1995, I have wanted to walk the Camino de Santiago. There are many ways *in* which and many speeds *at* which to make this walk. Some people do the whole 500 miles in a month. I wanted to undertake walking the Camino as a very intentional time of reflection and discovery and discernment. I didn't want to be in a hurry.

I had a strong sense that I was being called to something different, something new to me vocationally. I was open to many possibilities and had tested several of them, but I had not yet identified the next thing.

In 2020, after seven years' service as Episcopal Chaplain to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport and an equal number of years on the staff of Bishop Robert Wright in the Diocese of Atlanta, I was overdue for a three-month sabbatical. I planned to spend my sabbatical in Spain, walking the Camino at last after dreaming about it for twenty-five years.

In preparation, in 2019, I connected with a Camino mentor and a group of pilgrims hand-selected by him to walk the route together and, in doing so, began my preparations. During part of September, all of October, and part of November, we were to walk from high in the Pyrenees to the cathedral in Santiago and on to the coast. In the course of over two months together, we would have a pre-Camino retreat and a post-Camino retreat, several one-day retreats along the way, and one full day of rest from walking each week. An excellent plan.

In August 2019 I began counting miles and calories. Over the months I lost a total

of 35 pounds and logged hundreds of miles. By March 2020, I was feeling strong and ready to begin walking significantly longer distances as Alexander, my mentor, had recommended. I had all my gear. I was reading all the recommended books.

And then, you know what happened, right? COVID. Lockdown. We convened online as a group to discuss our options. By May it was clear that we would have to cancel the 2020 pilgrimage. Alexander, our mentor, arranged to move all reservations forward by one year to 2021. My bishop agreed that I could take my sabbatical the following year.

I continued walking and logging all my calories. I continued preparing. Planning and preparing are not the same, are they? When it was at last time to go, I wanted to be ready, to be prepared. I continued training for the Camino and working from home throughout 2020. I still anticipated making a work change but not until after completing the Camino in November 2021.

A year ago almost exactly right now I read a job description for the 34th rector of St Paul's, Key West. I read the parish profile. I felt as though they were written with me in mind. It felt like a calling not just a good idea. I read these as our reading from Ephesians describes "with the eyes of my heart enlightened." I withdrew from other job searches that I was in at the time, and I declined one very fine offer of employment.

And in the spring of 2021 my life Camino veered very sharply southward. By April I knew I was not headed to Spain but to South Florida, and, indeed, as far south in Florida as one can really go. I would not walk the Camino de Santiago in fall 2021; instead I would begin a new chapter with Becky and St Paul's in Cayo Hueso, officially commencing June 5, 2021.

And since beginning this chapter, repeatedly Becky and I hear from people from all the different chapters of our life that the photos of us here reveal that we are at home and content and in our element and on the right path. Or, as the reading from Jeremiah puts it, we appear "radiant over the goodness of God."

If I had been adamant that my Camino in Spain, long awaited, postponed from 2020 must happen in 2021 no matter what, I wouldn't be here with you now. I

probably wouldn't even have submitted my stuff to the search committee. I'm not sure where I would be and what I would be doing, but I wouldn't be here now.

What does any of this have to do with today's gospel?

The magi, these scholar-priest-astronomer-rulers, these Gentiles, traveled some 1,000 miles across shifting sands, through freezing desert nights, into the homeland of the Jewish people. They were on a pilgrimage. Their mission: to find the baby monarch whose star they had been tracking since its rising.

If the magi had been adamant that the newborn king of the Jews must be found in Jerusalem in the palace of the current king, Herod, they wouldn't have found baby Jesus or his mother in Bethlehem.

They found the baby because they were willing to combine what they knew about astronomy with other information presented to them by others along the way, including counselors of King Herod who disclosed the location of Bethlehem in Judea as the birthplace of the Messiah.

They found the baby, but he was not *where* they expected, and he was not *whom* they expected.

The magi demonstrate that we will find what we are looking for, even if it is not what we are expecting. I will testify to the same: I have found the work I was looking for, even though it is not what I expected.

If we are overly attached to itineraries and timetables, we may miss the real journey God has in mind for us.

The magi had a life-changing experience because they were focused on the mission of finding the baby *and* they remained open to completing the mission even as the details of how to carry it out evolved and changed.

After their baby-finding mission was accomplished, they continued to modify their plans in response to new information. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so, they returned to their home country by a different road. They went home another way.

Have you ever wondered what might have happened if the magi had not heeded the

warning that came to them in a dream? If they had just blown off the message not to return to Herod in Jerusalem?

Or what about if Joseph, a little later in this chapter, hadn't paid attention to his dream telling him to take Mary and baby Jesus and flee to Egypt to avoid the slaughter of the innocents?

What if the magi and Joseph hadn't paid attention to their dreams? We wouldn't be here, that's what.

We are the descendants of people who know, who have lived the truth that God comes to us through our intuition, in that feeling in our gut, in dreams, in visions, through the power of our imaginations. And if we pay attention, we will never be the same.

They had a life-changing experience because they altered their plans. They had a plan in the first place because they saw a star. They saw the star because they were paying attention.

We have to be, like the magi were, willing to integrate new information, new strategies and tactics, in order to fulfill our mission.

The magi remind us that we need to be committed enough to make the journey and flexible enough, adaptable enough, to allow new information, new realities to alter our plans.

Our mission, per the prayer book, page 855, and printed each week on the front of your bulletin, is "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

Our mission is restoration and reconciliation. And, in our particular context, in the heart of Key West and extending to the Lower Keys, that includes restoration of relationships and restoration of historic buildings. And it includes both things together.

These beautiful buildings entrusted to our care need a lot of work. Three of them are over a century old. They need restoration not just repair. We hold them in trust for the Diocese of Southeast Florida, and our stewardship of them involves making them increasingly available to the community in which we and they are located, are embedded.

And the mission of restoration of relationships needs our ongoing attention as well. In what ways are we called now to be positive, active, visible in the community? Where are the places we should show up and be a winsome Anglican witness?

How do we know how to move forward and what comes next?

The second reading from Ephesians gives us some help here: let us pray with that text for a spirit of wisdom and revelation as we continue to come to know God so that with the *eyes of our heart enlightened*, we may know what is the hope to which God has called us, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe.

It's the ninth day of Christmas. The feast of the Incarnation continues through Wednesday. We continue to keep the feast; I personally finished my candy yesterday. We continue to mark the days of the new year. We continue to journey together in Christ and with Christ *with the eyes of our heart enlightened*.

In a few minutes the chancel choir is going to sing an anthem entitled "Christmas Joy." The text of the anthem is that of a poem by the modern mystic Howard Thurman entitled "The Work of Christmas."

After the feast of Christmas concludes and the season of Epiphany begins, we return, once more, in earnest, to the carrying out of our mission, to the *work* of Christmas. What is that? Howard Thurman puts it this way:

"When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among people,  
To make music in the heart."