

Course Correction
Rev. Dorothy Boulton
January 2, 2022
Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Something amazing happened on Christmas Day last year. On December 25, 2021, the James Webb Space Telescope was launched. The largest, most ambitious telescope ever designed is now on its way to orbit the Sun, one million miles away from the earth. Its destination is the second Lagrange point, or L2, an orbit that is special in [that it lets the telescope stay in line with the earth as it moves around the sun.](#)

To achieve this orbit, several course corrections are required. The first was conducted 12 ½ hours into its journey, the second was 60 hours after liftoff, and the last will be at the end of the first month, about 29 days after launch. It's not till after six months that Webb will begin its science mission.

I have to say, that, given that this year, 2022, is starting out with some major stress and anxiety... the escalating spread of the Omicron variant, for one... this phenomenal exploration and information that we will receive from the Webb telescope fills me with wonder and awe and hope and anticipation and, dare I even say it, delight.

We all certainly need something to look forward to in 2022... because right now... life is tough.

Who knew that we'd be starting our first worship service together in the new year online? (Although I did look it up: last year none of us were in the sanctuary: we met on Zoom.)

And we've just faced a year that was marginally better than the one before it. We've encountered such fluctuating emotions during 2021: There was a political insurrection at our nation's capitol. Vaccines were available! Not everyone wants to get them, and some actually oppose them. Schools were back in person! The Delta variant spread. Vaccines became available for youth, and for children. Hospitalization numbers went down. Fights broke out in school board meetings over the wearing of masks. Because COVID numbers were decreasing, family gatherings were held. And sadly, so were funerals...some postponed from the previous year. In our church family, there were members who received distressing medical diagnoses. Thanks be to God – some babies were born! We resumed in-person worship in the sanctuary. Our Stephen Ministry was commissioned. The pavilion was dedicated. We said goodbye to people we loved. We had our first inurnment in the new columbarium. The choir sang. It's been a year of ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, celebrations and challenges.

Now, at the start of 2022, the Omicron variant is spreading. Some of our church members are ill and we offer our prayers for healing. It's unknown what will happen for the start of the school semester and for our child care center. And we are back to worshipping solely online... at least for the month of January.

We have been on a journey long and strange. A path with unexpected twists and turns. Course diversions, and course corrections. Yes, a journey long and strange.

That's why it is good to hear this text at this threshold moment of time. The Matthew text is one of the few that we hear every year – it's read on the Feast of the Epiphany, on January 6th after the 12 days of Christmastide. We know it as the Three Kings, or the Visit of the Magi. It's the story of their journey – long and strange – and the course corrections that led them to light, and to joy, and a dream that directs them home by another way.

By now the story is familiar. Wise ones from the East followed a star and arrived at Herod's palace, inquiring where they should find the King of the Jews. Herod, after consulting his religious authorities, informed them that the place was in Bethlehem. And he directed them to bring word when they had found him so that, he said, "I may also go and pay him homage."

This story begins the conflict of the two kings: one who is corrupt, deceitful, murderous. And one who is humble, world-changing, divine. It sets a context for Matthew's gospel: the revelation of what the kingdom, the realm, the empire of God looks like. And this story invites us to ask questions about charting our course: where do we find the Christ? And where do we go once we've encountered him?

I think on those wise ones long ago.... those travelers who were searching for the king. How did they decide who to trust, which path to follow? Their experience at Herod's palace might have been rather seductive, wouldn't you think? Soft pillows, rich food, luxurious surroundings, all the signs of imperial success. What was this compared to what they found in a humble home... a young mother and a poor and vulnerable child? This would be a course correction, indeed. Yet once they found the child of Light, they knew that this was Love revealed. They were "overwhelmed with joy." Their paths were changed. Course corrected.

If you are a Star Wars fan, you may have seen a show called *The Mandalorian*. The Mandalorian is a bounty hunter – he's paid to retrieve bounty, no matter who or what it is, no questions asked. It's a profession he's very, very good at. One day, the bounty he's commissioned to bring in turns out to be – a child. A young child; infant sized. And he makes a decision – a course correction – to not return this child to those who are planning to exploit its Jedi-like powers. Instead, he vows to protect it, to bring it to safety and home, despite the great cost to himself. "This is the way," he pronounces, as he embraces his role as parent-like protector. It is his mantra, his course-charting affirmation, "This is the way."

In their journey to the Christ child, the wise ones had stars and prophecies to guide them. When the time had come to return home after their encounter, their course was charted by a dream. I wonder about that dream: did all of the wise ones receive the same dream? Was it only one of them who then told it to the others? What might that conversation have been like? However it happened, they agreed on what was true. They received a course correction. They acknowledged that Light and Life was in that child; they could not return to Herod with his plans for evil and destruction, they must go home by another road.

I was visiting my older son, Matt, in Mexico last month. We had spent the evening outdoors at a friend's house in the desert mountains. When we'd finished our dinner and were heading home for the evening, it was time to walk along the path, back to the car. It was very, very dark. The moon hadn't yet risen; we were hours away from any town. A person there handed me a lantern; it was bright, casting a glow about 4 feet beyond. I was handed the lamp, and invited to lead the small procession. It wasn't easy. We took a few wrong steps before we found the path. There were a few course corrections. But as we were walking, I blurted out this thought: This is my job! At the church! I said. Having a bit of light to share and saying to others: come with me, I can see the way... a little bit. We can walk together.

That's what we are asked to do as we head into this new year, church. To follow the light, even though sometimes it may shine only a little ways ahead. And sometimes we might need a little course correction. We take a few steps at a time. And we trust that we'll get to where we need to be.

Like those Magi, we travel together. We have amazing and gracious companions in one another. We support one another, pray for one another, and sometimes we even sit in the darkness with one another. We sit at table together – whether in the sanctuary or in our homes – and share bread for the journey.

There are some ways we can intentionally and faithfully travel on this path together. If you take a look at the January newsletter that was sent out on Saturday, (it was included in the worship announcement), you'll see that we're offering a zoom discussion using Rowan William's book: Being Disciples. Maybe you'd like to read it, hear other's thoughts and experiences, share your own, encourage others on the path.

Or, perhaps you are looking for a new star word to help guide you through this year. For the past two years, we've given out or mailed little stars, with words to reflect on, to listen to. Oddly enough, on Christmas Eve I had a different hymnal up here on the chancel bench, and my star word from 2019 popped out! It was GENEROSITY. That one was a great star word. I was inspired by it. Led by it. Lived it. I liked it. My star word from this past year --- was GROW. That one...didn't resonate so much. I'm ready for a new one.

This year we're not to give our star words out randomly. Instead, we invite you to choose your own. Though I'm going to give you a suggestion about what you might choose from. What did those wise travelers from our scripture need, or receive? How about JOY, TRUST, HOPE, DIGNITY, FAITH, WISDOM, REST, DREAM? Maybe the word you need for your journey is PERSISTENCE, COURAGE, PATIENCE, COMFORT, RESILIENCE, FORTITUDE, KINDNESS, FORGIVENESS, WHOLENESS, HEALING, PEACE.

Choose a word. Write it down. Think on it. Take it out from time to time and reflect on it. See what course it helps set for you.

As we contemplate our coming journey around the sun, as we look to what lies ahead, we know there will be much in this coming year that will seek to lead us to the Herods of this world... to that which takes life away: frustrated anger and rage, bitterness, jealousy, selfishness, despair. We don't set out with false optimism. We know that even after the Magi's rerouted visit, Herod nevertheless slaughtered the innocents.

Yet, as we go forth into this year, we travel on in faith-- seeking signs of hope, committing acts of radical trust. Inspired, sustained and guided by the Source of Being, our course is set: It is Justice. It is Peace. It is Love. It is following, seeking, serving Christ -- the Light of the World.

This is the way.