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 Texts: Matthew 2:1-12
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On Brave and Startling Truths: Home by Another Way
“They left for their own country by another road.” Matthew 2:12

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The pandemic has brought out my inner star gazer. More than at any other time in my life, I've been drawn to an evening ritual of standing outside at twilight to watch for the moon and stars to rise. Did you happen to see the full moon last Tuesday night? It was magical and illuminated everything in a haloed glow.

Maybe you, too, tried to study the night sky for what scientists were calling “The Great Conjunction” of kissing planets on December 21st; Jupiter and Saturn came closer to one another than they ever have in centuries (since the Middle Ages). From where I stood near the lake, all I could see was a disappointing and hazy glob of moon in between trees. But a friend sent beautiful photos of the two planets forming what appeared to be one larger star called by some, the Christmas Star or Star of Bethlehem. Around the time of the Solstice, too, many of us stayed up late to watch the meteor showers of falling stars, making wish upon wish upon wish.

I thought of the Serbian proverb,

*Be humble for you are made of earth
 Be noble for you are made of stars.*

As we stand on the cusp of this new year, a year full of new possibilities and responsibilities, I am in awe of what we've endured together. What we've endured this year as a church community, as a people, as a world. We have a distance yet to go, but scientists and epidemiologists remind us of the starlight at the end of this arduous tunnel.

So much has been revealed and uncovered.

So much has been stripped away.

With the overlay of death everywhere in the background.

Like a midnight sky cleared of cloud cover, many things, many gifts I'd call them, have arisen.

Clarity is one of the gifts that has been revealed to me during this past year of pandemic.

What is something that has been uncovered for you in these months?

We've been living through a time of Great Disruption. Disruption of lives and livelihoods irrevocably lost, streets emptied, holidays turned upside down. We've experienced radical shifts in the rhythm of our days. Family time, work time, school time, weekends and weekdays are often blurred together.

Once the worst of this pandemic is officially over experts tell us, the aftershocks may be very, very hard to manage. Maybe even harder than living through the stir-craziness of lockdown and social distance from all we know.

Our fragility is visible and reveals a vulnerability that has always been there but perhaps is more real to us now.

Sobering as all of this is, we now turn the page to a whole new year and are given an opportunity to live together in a new way. When the time comes, we will emerge from our forced monasticism. How we choose to live out that re-emergence will determine much about not only our lives as a people but as a planet, too.

The wise Magi from the East, whatever their numbers, were from *Elsewhere*. Found in Matthew's text, all we know is these travelers were strangers, outsiders, fortune tellers. These stargazers were probably unknown to one another and to the country they now traveled to.

They, too, were searching. They, too, faced unknowns and threats. They didn't have a map except for the night sky. They were wise, however, for from what we're told, they knew how to watch and listen attentively not only to the heavens but to the voices and sights around them on the journey. They encountered a star, a Herod and a baby in a manger.

And thus, once they made their way to bow and share what gifts they carried, they knew it was time to take another way home. To risk unfamiliar terrain rather than return by way of the threatening king. "*They left for their own country by another road.*"

What riches does this story hold for us today and what stars will you choose to follow in the coming months? What is it you want to be traveling with? What do we no longer need to carry with us and what are the essentials for the journey of this New Year?

Climate activist Bill McKibben, in a series for the New Yorker called *Annals of a Warming Planet*, wrote this wisdom in a recent essay: "...what we need to be figuring out is how we can create a way of living that continues to celebrate what it is to be human in this unfathomable world, full of intricate mysteries, tragedies, frailty and extremes. A way of living that affirms we are part of this web, and that as long as we are breathing and here, we have a role to play, and all are needed right now to be co-creating our new story. *A human story that is about regenerative practice, love, compassion and kindness.*"¹

This call for a new, regenerative practice, is an alternative path. And central to the life's work of explorer and naturalist Sir David Attenborough. His documentary, *A Life on the Planet*, was

¹ Bill McKibben at <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-a-warming-planet/where-we-stand-on-climate>

released last fall and it is a must-see. In the film, Attenborough gives us a broad blueprint for the way forward. While the movie and accompanying book addresses the climate crisis we face head-on, Attenborough shares his amazing life journey and vision for the future. The project is his witness statement and his warning. A veteran explorer, at 93 years of age, Attenborough has travelled to every continent on earth and filmed his adventures for the world to see.

The opening scene of the film shows Attenborough standing in the wreckage of an abandoned building in Chernobyl, the now defunct site of the worst nuclear accident in our world's history. It is viscerally shocking and haunting to see what remains of this once bustling Ukrainian city, destroyed in 1986.

From there, Attenborough narrates the changes in the natural world he's witnessed over his lifetime, from the wonder and beauty of living things to the devastation of the earth and plundering of the deep seas.

With stunning images, this explorer shows us the disappearance of the Amazon forests and the chalky death of the world's coral reefs that now resemble underwater graveyards. We learn that in the last 50 years, two-thirds of the earth's wildlife has disappeared. Disappeared.

In addition to these harsh realities, Attenborough shares with the audience the beloved wilderness he's come to know from pink clouds of flamingos flaunting it at Lake Natron in Tanzania to the dragonsque visage of Land Iguanas sunbathing on rocks in the Galapagos. There is no landscape untouched by human destruction however.

Attenborough doesn't leave us without hope. In fact, I was left with the feeling of possibility as he explains that while our "planet is headed for disaster, we can yet put it right." In particular, Attenborough describes what we can do as human agents of change on the planet. While we cannot reverse the damage we've done ecologically, we can do what he and other scientists call, Rewilding.

Rewilding means learning to work with nature rather than against it.

Rewilding calls for restraining from greed. It calls for allowing our oceans to lie fallow and cease the consumptive overfishing that we and many global partners engage in. Within a decade, the oceans could be replenished, coral reefs can regrow, wildlife habitats can flourish with diversity once again.

Rewilding means harnessing our natural resources in earth-friendly ways so that we can reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and use renewal of solar energy.

Ultimately, a "Theology of Rewilding" invites us to imagine how we, too, can allow for our community to rebuild and replenish -- where we live. To daily consider our carbon footprint and compassionate choices. We can't afford to do otherwise.

As we sat under the stars on New Year's Eve around a fire, and wondered how this coming year would unfold, I recalled Maya Angelou's poem. Written in 1995, her poem called, A Brave and

Startling Truth, famously flew into space aboard the Orion spacecraft on a mission into the heavens. It was written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations.²

A Brave and Startling Truth

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
 Traveling through casual space
 Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
 To a destination where all signs tell us
 It is possible and imperative that we learn a brave and startling truth
 And when we come to it
 To the day of peacemaking
 When we release our fingers from fists of hostility
 And allow the pure air to cool our palms
 When we come to it
 We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
 Whose hands can strike with such abandon
 That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
 Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness...
 When we come to it
 We, this people, on this wayward, floating body...
 Have the power to fashion for this earth
 A climate where every man and every woman (every person)
 Can live freely ...
 When we come to it...
 We must confess that we are the possible,
 We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
 That is when, and only when we come to it.

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When we come to it, how shall we navigate this uncertain path homeward together? Perhaps this time of pandemic, upheaval, and suffering can be a time of transformation, too. Of reimagination and rewilding and deep commitment towards harnessing our collective, holy energies.

With God's grace, we must go by another way.

² To read the complete poem see: <https://www.poetryverse.com/maya-angelou-poems/brave-and-startling-truth>