

Stories for the Beginning: The Road Isn't Straight – Isaiah 43:16-21, Matthew 2:1-12

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The effects of the late summer hurricane in east Tennessee and western North Carolina are still being felt by thousands of those areas' residents. As so often happens following disasters, after the initial devastation and subsequent groundswell of support, the memory of those permanently affected wanes.

About the only time we think of a disaster's devastation after that initial push is when it still affects us. In the case of Hurricane Milton's impact, we only think of it when we drive east or southeast—seeking to reach Ashville and beyond.

Many of you have been detoured as you made your way to see friends or relatives east of here. My son Jacob is at Montreat Conference Center this weekend for the annual College Conference. And his trip was extended by a half hour because of the detour he had to take.

Life detours us. It takes us down paths we didn't see coming.

Early on New Year's Day this week, New Orleans and our nation were detoured. On the first day of 2025, we had planned on the annual celebration of goodwill that accompanies a new year's arrival. People had reveled the night before amid New Year's Eve parties, the Rose Parade on Wednesday morning begged us to smile and marvel at the beauty of flower-covered floats on a glorious California morning.

But by then, we had already been sent down a different path. The terrorism in New Orleans early that morning put us on a

journey we hadn't anticipated. Amid the hope and optimism of new beginnings came a grim reminder for the nation: evil is still present. In a murderous and tragic way, we were reminded that the roads we travel aren't always straight.

Each of us finds our life unfolding with unexpected turns, of course, throughout our journey — some imposed upon us and some we courageously choose to take. Sometimes they are minor turns; other times, they are sharp turns that take us far off the path we had planned.

And yet, sometimes, the most profound moments in life come from taking those turns that lead us away from our meticulously-planned routes.

King Herod, steeped in ulterior motives, directed the Magi to report back to where the Christ child was. But after being divinely warned in a dream, the Magi chose *not* to return to Herod, opting to leave "by another road" according to Matthew.

Their decision to embrace alternative paths challenges us as we think about our own journeys. The Magi were willing to have their assumptions challenged and plans changed. The same is true for us: While we don't choose some paths, there are some detours we courageously choose to take because we know that the hope we have in God will accompany us.

Whether we choose another path or have it imposed upon us, we can survive and thrive in it because God is accompanying us and promising to do a new thing whatever that path is.

The magi's decision to go home by another way kept both them and the newborn Jesus safe from Herod's harm.

I think it's important for us to be mindful of the unexpected turns in our lives that have led to unexpected blessings.

I can't help but think of what my life was like four years ago and how a monumental change that year which I was not expecting has led to a monumental blessing as we begin 2025.

You know, I never in my life thought that I would get a divorce at some point. Nobody who does go through divorce does think that. And yet, no matter the circumstances behind it, it does happen to many, many people.

There's not the same stigma around divorce that there was a generation or more ago. Yet, by definition, a divorce is a failure—a failed marriage. And so I really struggled with accepting that failure in my life. There had really not been any divorces in my family—my parents and grandparents had enjoyed long, long marriages. I was the outlier, and that really impacted me for a good while.

But that detour led me to where I am today. It was an unchosen path but one that wasn't absent of hope. I was guided along that path by God, through the presence of so many loving people. And, of course, it led me to choose a new path, a period of discovery that led to a greater awareness of who I am as a person. And it eventually led me to Laura, whom I look forward to marrying in 2025.

A crooked path inflicted upon us, over time, becomes a new path that we choose for ourselves because of the greater strength and growth we acquire in being knocked off our route.

The Magi maybe believed they had little choice. They had to take another path home after their visit to the Christ-child. It was a decision they initially hadn't planned on making but may have discovered it was the only decision that was going to guarantee their safety.

I absolutely love when we are afforded opportunities to make decisions that will make our lives better. Those decisions can be scary and may mean that we will have to change course. But they are decisions that can really advance us to a new position in life that will bring us greater satisfaction.

The former presidential speechwriter and author Peggy Noonan writes a weekly column in the Wall Street Journal which I enjoy reading every Friday. Politically she's pretty middle of the road and she's very practical in her writing.

This week, she wrote what came off as an advice column. With a new year starting, she titled her column "Signposts on the Wisdom Trail: Things I've Learned from Lincoln, C.S. Lewis, David Foster Wallace, and My Friend's Grandmother."

In her lengthy list, here were a few things that stood out:

"An Italian grandmother was stirring the sauce on the stove as I, age about 10, and my friend, her granddaughter, fantasized about how a local family must be rich, millionaires, they just bought a big car. "Don't count other people's money," the grandmother said. You don't know all the facts and it's none of your business. "Don't catalog other people's sins." That came from somebody then, and the spirit was, "You want a catalogue, go to Sears."

"I once read that Abraham Lincoln said if you asked most people to put all their troubles in an open sack and place it down next to their neighbors' sacks and then everyone was told to pick one up and keep it, most people would hesitate barely a moment before they picked up their own sack and took it home. Everyone thinks they have it worse than everyone else but they don't, and anyway their own troubles are at least familiar, and tolerable, and theirs."

“The only truth to tell a young couple about to get married: God is real and babies are everything. The only advice for a college graduate: Honest work makes the world go round, bring your talents to market. The important thing to tell a student entering college or high school: Read. Reading deepens. Social media keeps you where you are. Reading makes your mind do work. You have to follow the plot, imagine what the ballroom looked like, figure the motivations of the characters. Reading is a rocket ship, new worlds.”

And finally, her closing piece of advice, the piece that resonates with what we’ve been talking about when it comes to choosing new and more difficult paths:

“A man in his early 80s told my friend, who was his psychotherapist, that what he really wanted to do was learn Italian, but that’s absurd, he’ll likely be dead in 10 years, what would he do with it? The therapist said, “Well, you can die knowing Italian or die not knowing Italian. Which is better?” So the old man studied Italian, happily. It’s never too late. On a piece of paper above my computer is a quote from David Foster Wallace: “Good writing isn’t a science, it’s an art, and the horizon is infinite. You can always get better.”

We can always get better. And that’s what is possible when we take a path that is risky or courageous. Sometimes the path is thrust upon us and we get better as a result of it. Sometimes, it’s our choice. And with that choice, we move to a place that in some simple or more complex way makes us better.

And we’re never alone on this curvy or jagged road. Like the Magi who had a star to guide them to the Christ child, we have the presence of a loving God always by our side—leading us no matter the direction we take.

In Isaiah 43, God says, "Forget the former things; don't dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing." That crooked path we take by force or by choice may just lead to something new and better.