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Signs on the Road

A few months ago during a trip up north I was confidently navigating the expressways that make up that stretch of road between here and O'Hare. I was feeling cool and in control in the driver's seat. I might as well have been ignoring any sign of where I was supposed to be going. Whether they be signs clearly marked up ahead or the sign right next to me-- named Ole, who kept asking if I needed help navigating. "Of course not," I said. Thanks for the offer.

One of the things that makes me feel like I really know a place is when I can get around without google maps or someone else telling me where my next turn is going to be. I like to know it by heart.

Then we got to a part of the highway that I did not recognize. That feeling that we all know came upon me. Oops. Sorry. I guess I need some help. Time to pull over. Should have heeded those signs.

Signs are a gift. Especially for sinners like me. What would we do without them? The ones up ahead and the ones sitting right next to us. They are there to lead us to where we need to go.

Some signs are more welcome than others. Most guide us predictably. Every once in a while we will encounter others. Like those dreaded orange ones with the black arrow. Detour. That's a whole different story.

Then there is the business of following them. Trusting their wisdom as opposed to our own.

What was it that caused them, compelled them, to actually follow it? Of all people. Do we dare follow them to the place *or places* where the star shines still?

The Magi--- the unexpected in myriad ways. Outsiders to the Jewish people. Star gazers. Zoroastrian priests. Foreigners. Not from around here. Led by curiosity, faith, a dream, or something else, they journey beyond the political, economic, and religious power center of Jerusalem until they reach backwater Bethlehem (a sign) just as it had been told them. They follow the sign in the sky-- and are themselves signs for us.

There are 15 signs in the Illinois rules of the road.

Signs come in all shapes and sizes. Left to our own devices we struggle with asking for help, assistance, or directions. We are so determined to do things our own way, we miss the ones pointing to the star, deciphering its coordinates. Looking past the sign we need. Leading us to the child. Inviting us into abundant life that always finds us beyond ourselves.

It might be uncomfortable. A stretch. Something new. Simply acknowledging the existence of those so unlike us. That's the life of faith. After all, death leads to resurrection and resurrection is something that happens to us again and again. What or who might we discover along the way- hand in hand with those messengers? As Isaiah says, lift up your eyes and look around.

These Wise Ones lead us then and now to the antithesis of Herod and all his dubious doppelgangers and want to be despots. Signs are plentiful. As one preacher notes, The infant ruler is born in humility, comes not to take life but to give it, not to wield power and authority against people as weapons, but to live among others as a servant. He comes to heal, save, and deliver. Not in conquest but in cruciform love.

In his presence, they offer him gifts, but he is the gift that is given across space and millenia. Even today. Vulnerable. Dependent. With Mary. (Signs) He reveals all that God is because he is the fulness of the Triune God wrapped in your flesh and mine. There is no more or less to God than what we see revealed, manifest, in this child. God- for you and God for all nations and peoples. Jesus Christ. Sign and salvation.

It started out as a warning. Do not return to Herod. You cannot go back the way you came. Retracing your steps will not suffice. The particularities are as numerous as our lives. The experience is familiar. It takes a while for your memory to catch up with the miles. Your soul surroundings are still sketchy. Things are different now. It's like you've been rerouted a thousand times. Detours. Wandering. Storms, turbulence, traffic jams, curiosity, road work, wrestling with God. I don't know what you call it.

However you set out- your home now. Finally. Again. Still. Is anything recognizable? Are you? Maybe not. But we need you- and all that you have seen. You are signs of *resurrection*. New life. Courage. The future. The star is still up ahead. If we follow this child as he grows in wisdom and years we run headlong into the cross. Epiphany. Revelation. Destination wherever you are.

Now- this sign of signs has been traced on your brow and theirs. Wherever you go you will never be lost. You belong to this God. The one whose embrace has room for all the places you've been. Who will always recognize you even when you don't recognize yourself.

Signs. Even when you can't read them, the weather in the valley of the shadow is too foggy, he is with you. By your side. In your hands. Coming towards you. This child knows you by heart.

