I depend strongly on my GPS to get around.

I’m not what you would call a naturally gifted navigator.

So, the superpower of being able to get directions
from an electronic device is far from lost on me.

That pun is intended
because upon moving to Elgin two years ago,
I would have been far more lost without it.

In fact, the most lost I have ever been
was on a trip to Elgin from Richmond, IN.

I was invited to work on some worship services for a church conference.
I was driving up alone, and it was
a longer trip than I had ever driven by myself at that time.

On the way I was asked to pick up another conference planner
at the Midway airport.
No problem right?
Just get on the right highway and follow the airport signs.
Unfortunately, there are a lot of airport signs on 65 and 294 before one arrives anywhere near Midway. This is how I found myself driving up to an industrial airfield in the dark and talking to a very confused security guard at the gate. This is how I found myself on my less-than-smart cell phone talking with someone in Elgin, trying in vain to figure out where I was and how to get back to where I needed to be.

If you think it would be laughably simple to discern the difference between Midway airport and an Indiana country airstrip even from a distance, you have now begun to understand the extent of my directional challenge and my then complete lack of context for what I was looking for.

At this point, you may also have begun to understand why I so prefer public transit, when someone else can be driving and navigating!

That night, I was tired. I was confused. I was embarrassed.

I had to pull over, calm my nerves, dry my tears, comfort my stinging pride, and accept that I was miserably lost.

I wish I could tell you that at that moment I had a blinding spiritual insight or a star arose in the east to guide me northwest to Elgin.

But the only thing blazing near me would have been a neon sign welcoming me to a Sunoco gas station.

No, instead, I did the hard work of marshaling my patience, courage, and humility to get me where I needed to go.
I don’t know that the Magi had anything like this experience. They didn’t have GPS right? But surely they were better navigators. They were experienced readers of the stars. That’s what made them Magi, priests probably of an ancient Eastern religion that valued the wisdom of astrology. They may well have also been experienced travelers at least by the time they made it to Jerusalem. They may have even been traveling with a large entourage of colleagues and helpers. There were three gifts. So, we have assumed there were three of them, but for all we really know there could have been twenty or more.

And yet, on their way to baby Jesus, even they got lost. Did they stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions? Or is it that more likely that’s where they expected to find the newborn king—in the palace of power? With King Herod in the capital city?

Isn’t that where the new king should be?

The text tells us they had observed a star at its rising, and had come to pay homage, to worship, to honor, and to stand in the presence of one with such auspicious stars that there could be no mistake he was to be a great ruler.

This summer bands of travelers from all over the United States aligned themselves across a specific line,
called the path of totality
so that they could witness and observe
the relatively rare occurrence of a total solar eclipse.

There will be another in just a few years,
and I’m hoping to make it to that path
so that I too can witness what happens
when the sun is blotted out nearly completely.

For a moment it must seem as though
you’re walking on the face of another planet
or living in a time between time.

Even here, where we saw a high percentage but not full totality
the shadows were cast unnaturally,
the air became still and cool,
and the crickets called from the catmint in my front yard
in the middle of the day as they would in the middle of the night.

I imagine the Magi were folks who sought these kind of thrills.
They used their skills, resources, and study
to travel to the epicenter of a most intriguing star event.
They crossed miles, countries, cultures, and likely languages,
so that they could bask in the wonder and awe
to which the star pointed.

There was no Amazon or UPS.
Yet, I suspect they could have sent messengers or emissaries
of some kind to deliver their gifts for them.
No, instead they came themselves.
I wonder if they felt like meeting that newborn king
was one event they needed to see in the flesh.
I wonder if they felt drawn to that star
like the tide is pulled by the moon.
I wonder if they were impatient and expectant in their quest
like my cold hands rushing to the warm radiator on these freezing days.

However they came, they had enough curiosity and courage
to come seeking an experience
that I do not believe they would have hesitated to call holy.

In their quest to find this holy star child, however,
the Magi tipped off his existence to the murderous tyrant King Herod.

King Herod was less the path of totality chasing type it seems
and more the path of power chasing type.

He was best known for rebuilding the Temple in grandiose measures
and for killing anyone who dared to oppose him,
including his own relatives.

Matthew’s story tells us, when Herod heard the Magi
were looking for a child whose birth had been marked by a star
and who was to be “the king of the jews”
he assumes it is the Messiah.

Indeed, he is the first one beyond the narrator to use that word in Matthew,
when he calls together the chief priests and scribes of the people to ask
where the Messiah was to be born.
Those of us who have read this story before already know what other readers will find out in the few verses after today’s reading, that the reason Herod wants to know where the Messiah has been born is so that he can kill him.

And when he does not learn the child’s exact location, he kills all the children under two in and around Bethlehem for good measure.

He’s a monster.
That’s a monstrous act.
I don’t know any other way to describe it.

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Here’s a place where I find it very hard to stomach the saying that “everything happens for a reason.”

I believe God can help us learn something from even a horrifying tragedy. But I’m not one who believes God wills those tragedies for whatever reason. Because, what was the reason to kill all those children? Does God will that kind of suffering for whatever purpose?

I don’t believe so. Instead, I believe that until all creation is made whole and that moral arc of the universe is finally bent to meet justice, we will see these kinds of monsters and this kind of monstrosity.
When we see the monstrosity in today’s story though
    I believe we choose what we want to see.
We may choose to see mothers whose mourning is as deep as our own.
We may choose to see a tyrant who looks like a monster we know.
Or we may choose to see the monster that lurks in all of us.

    In a time of heightened contempt for others who are unlike us,
    I believe that may be the most helpful monster to see.

Because,

What is the good news we would hear that would threaten us?

Whose good fortune would make us jealous and enraged?

What loss of our own would lead us to want someone else to pay?

If this monster in your own heart is hard to find
    then congratulations you don’t have one,
    or you’re not looking hard enough.

When news of the star child dawned on Herod
    it found him threatened and murderous.
    He never left his palace to find this Holy one
    but instead sent his people to destroy the child.
I do not believe overcoming our own monsters
    even needs to mean leaving our own homes
    but it may mean leaving our own palaces of comfort
    in one way or another.
It may mean asking genuinely curious questions of someone with whom you disagree instead of telling them why they’re wrong.

It may mean putting ourselves in situations that make us appropriately uncomfortable so that we can learn and grow.

It may mean accepting a loss of unjustly gained power, wealth, or status so that we can all have what we all need.

It may be painful and difficult to change our way of thinking, to show compassion when we are outraged, to share our power with those who are different, or to leave the comfort of what we know but I believe when we do so, we are often rewarded with powerful revelations of the joy-bringing presence of God.

Epiphany is a church season that makes room for that kind of revelation. Epiphany begins with the story of these Magi traveling from their palaces of comfort to stand before the newborn king.

Now epiphanies can range in size from life-changing to day-making, to smile-inducing but I believe all can bring joy and all are worthy of celebration because they reveal the joy-bringing presence of God in our lives.
On these wintry days, it feels as though it takes three years
to get everyone and everything in my family outside
with all the gear we have to wear and the things we need to bring.

Yesterday, though I patiently and determinedly dressed the boys and I in our winter gear
and headed out to a special polar bear story time at the Elgin Public Museum.

I didn’t get lost. It was a short trip—one that I know well.
   But just getting out the door took such monumental effort
   I couldn’t imagine anything could be worth it.

Marge Fox is the name of the woman who led an hour’s worth of polar bear stories
yesterday with a gaggle of preschoolers and their parents.

She had pictures and displays and plush animals to hug.
   She had them participate and repeat back to her.
      She was entirely captivating.
   She radiated the confidence of an experienced classroom teacher,
      the hospitality of an accomplished hostess,
      and the deep love for children of an adoring grandmother.

I was as enthralled as the children.
   As I sat on the carpet, leaning against the back wall
      while Marge taught my children that a polar bear
         actually has translucent fur and black skin,
      I was so overwhelmed with gratitude
      to be in the presence of this woman’s profound gift
         that I started to cry.
   Tears just leaked right out of my face.
When the Magi saw the star had stopped they rejoiced with great joy.

Then they gave Jesus their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

If I had been carrying cash that day I would have put it all in the donation box, the way my children feed nickels to the animal banks in the children’s section of the Gail Borden Public Library.

I wonder if that’s the way it feels to be in the presence of the Christ-child?
I wonder if it feels like the kind of heart-bursting, tear-inducing,
joy-bringing gratitude for which we would gladly
wrestle small children into snow pants,
travel across countries and cultures,
defy tyrants and listen to our dreams,
get a little lost along the way but keep trying anyway,
try something new and eventually at least laugh at our failures,
show compassion to strangers and strange people,
leave our palaces of comfort
and even see in the monsters we find
not only a human being lashing out in the midst of their own need
but an opportunity to confront the monsters that lurk in our own hearts.

So, this Epiphany, may we move and be moved
to our own journeys of seeking, observing, and celebrating
the joy-bringing presence of that holy star child
in whom God’s love was and is fully revealed.

May it be so. Amen.