**"The Road Isn't Straight"**

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Texts: Matthew 2: 1-12 and Isaiah 43: 16-21

 Suleika Jaouad had a life plan. She had a fiance. She had dreams of being a war correspondent. Instead, this 22-year-old leukemia patient wrote an article for the New York Times entitled, "Life, Interrupted." I came across Suleika through a TED talk called, "What almost dying taught me about living." It's a very thoughtful TED talk and I recommend it to you highly. We'll talk more about her story later, but it directly relates to the story of the magi -- another one of those familiar stories about which we think we know much, but we know so little. The magi, like Jaouad, found that life had other plans than the ones they had made. What I hope you take away this morning is that no matter where life leads, God is with us through every twist and turn. Life is complicated and nuanced. Just because things "didn't go according to plan" doesn't mean they went wrong.

 I'm not sure which story to talk about first, so I guess I'll choose the magi. Theologians have argued for years whether or not there were three, about whether or not they were astrologers, or whatever. Nothing wrong with it, but I think Kelley Nikondeha in her book *The First Advent in Palestine* gives us a lot to think about related to these people.

 We continually forget the social context of the birth of Jesus and this trek of the magi. For all intents and purposes, Jesus lived in a police state. Herod was fearful and did everything he could to keep his eye on people. Despite all of Herod's survellance efforts, "he never did see the star (Nikondeha, p.131)."

 "In [the] advent narrative, Matthew describes that bright star appearing, pointing to a promise for all occupied lands from west to east, ancient and contemporary. And those in this account who came from the East, from another land and religious tradition -- the magi-- are the ones who crack open our understanding about hope in hard places, about resistance, and about the necessity of stars." I bet you didn't know that when the magi left they, "followed with openness and hunger, unaware of where the star would ultimately lead. Going toward the west, toward enemy territory, took courage. Against the headwinds of the ruling regime in Persia and generations of subjugation, they slipped away to honor another ruler." Did you know that regions to the east were much like where Jesus lived, just with a different ruler?

 Further, "their gifts, their homage to the Bethlehemite king (that would be Jesus) pointed to possible treason." And they found this king in "a most unexpected place".

 Most of us know that Herod had requested that the magi come to him with news of the birth of the baby, but they went home another way, "taking with them another treason-worthy gift: new hope."

 They did go home another way, but more than that, on their way home, there was no star. It's one thing to travel great distances, risk your life, challenge authority -- you name it -- with a clear directional sign. But many times our journey, especially our journey home, does not come with such an obvious sign.

 Suleika Jaouad was diagnosed at 22 years old with a type of leukemia that has a 35% chance of long-term survival. She recalls that she was patient number 5624. Like most patients with any life-threatening illness, she focused on surviving. The great news is that she did and in fact, she was completely cured!

 She then goes on to relate the main point of her TED talk. She remarked, "In trauma, people treat you differently. They tell you that you've lived a hero's journey. And it's true that cancer transformed my life. But the hardest part of my life was after the cancer was gone." She also wanted us to know that she believes talking about the heroes journey was not only untrue, but harmful. She is grateful to be alive, but to project upon a cancer survivor (or any other survivor) heroism and that she should feel constant gratitude was unhelpful. For you see, "healing begins after the treatment ends."

 Over the course of time her relationship broke up. In fact, many relationships suffered. Her inner scaffolding, which had upheld her so well through her treatment, now crumbled. "Now that I survived, I had no idea how to live. On paper I was better, but I never felt further from being well. Chemo took a lot out of my body, but cancer left a psychological imprint." She suffers from a form of PTSD. "We talk of re-entry with war and incarceration," she relates,"but we never talk about it with illness." She felt both lucky to be alive and yet so sad and so lost. In fact, at one point she wanted to be ill again because she missed the support of the hospital ecosystem. "The clarity of staring mortality in the face gives incredible focus, but when it's over..."

 Like the magi, she once had clear directions. She knew exactly where she was going, and she had a good clue of what to do next: survive. But at the end of treatment she was 27 with no job, no partner, and no structure.

 A lot of times life is that way. We are clear and then we're not. Post-divorce, retirement, a job change, a move, illness -- you name it. Even at the end of someone else's life we may have an idea of what to do next, and have a support system to do it, but after the person passes, then what? And for people of faith, the question also becomes, "Where is God in all of this?"

 Our Bible is full of stories of those who learned (sometimes the hard way) that the road isn't straight. "Life will unfold with unexpected turns. At some point, we could be called upon to embark on a long journey to an unknown place. We will surely encounter barriers, detours, and deterrents along the way. And if we're listening closely to God's still, small voice, we may find ourselves stepping on a new path...Life's road was never meant to be a straight line from one point to the next...Many Christians were taught to 'follow the straight and narrow", but our materials for today and our scriptural history push back against that idea. Kayla Craig writes of the magi, "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: We don't have to have all the answers or an obstacle-free path because hope is what empowers our journey."

 That is what Suleika Jaouad was looking for: hope. Surprisingly, she found it through some social media outlets in which people supported her through her illness. When the PTSD hit, she decided that she needed change. She decided to go on a "pack-your-bags" kind of journey that took she and her dog, Oscar, on a 15,000 mile journey across the US. She describes the journey beautifully, and I recommend you watch someday.

 "When suffering loss or trauma, it is natural to want to guard your heart. I needed to open myself up to uncertainty," Jaouad said. Further, she relates, "Meaning is not found in the material realm. Meaning is found when everything else is stripped away. A teenager suffering from a life threatening illness wrote, "It's more dangerous and radical to live in hope than to live hemmed in by fear".

 I want to talk about this all day, but like I've been doing a lot lately, I think the words of some of my sources are better than mine to communicate a point. So today I want to end with some quotes from Suleika Jaouad's TED talk and hope they mean as much to you as they did to me:

 *The most important learning is that the divide between sick and well is porous. The vast majority of us will travel back and forth between those realms.*

 *Once I learned to accept my limitations, I did start to feel better.*

 *Stop seeing our health as binary: well and unwell, whole versus broken. Stop thinking there is a perfect state. Stop persuing a state of satisfaction.*

 And the most important of them all: *Every one of us will have our life interrupted. We need to find ways to live in the in-between places. If you can do that, then you have taken the real hero's journey .*

 Friends, its true we don't always know where we're going, but it is important to know that we are not alone in our journey. It's important to know that God is with us and I hope that in this new year, one bound to be full of twists and turns, that a light will guide you home.

May we hear this blessing:

 It's okay if your journey hasn't looked like you thought it would. As you navigate twists and turns, stay curious and open to where God might be leading. May you find the courage to explore new routes and the wisdom to follow the One who will never leave or forsake you. May each new path be a chance to trust God and discover deeper truths about the love that will never let you go.

 In the many blessed names of God. Amen.