

SURROUNDED BY STARS – FCCH – Mark Acker – 1/4/2026

Let's be honest, on this first Sunday of a new year, most of us are carrying baggage from the past year: health challenges, mental health challenges, ongoing grief, relationship challenges, loneliness, sadness and anger with all that is going on in our country and deep concern and fear about what is happening between the United States and Venezuela. It's a lot.

It's into this space that this statement from the Gospel reading "and they went home another way" offers us some possibilities as we begin a new year. It's a statement that encourages us to ask ourselves questions like "What road have I been traveling simply because it was familiar?" "Where have I been guided by fear rather than faith?" "Where am I feeling stuck?" and "What is my calling at this moment in my life?"

I see "going home by another way" alive through the Walk for Peace by the Buddhist monks and their dog Aloka. I've been following the journey of these monks, and I know that many of you have been also. Every step is taken, they say, with the purpose of reminding people about peace, loving kindness and compassion. The monks are from a Buddhist monastery in Ft. Worth, Texas, and they began their 2,300 mile journey to Washington, DC on October 26. Today is Day 71, and they anticipate reaching Washington on Day 120. As the trip has progressed, hundreds of people are lining the roads to see the monks, and over 500,000 people are now following them on Facebook. In addition to their walk, on most days at lunch or dinner time, the monks offer a peace sharing talk to the gathered crowd, and they make daily posts on social media.

On Friday, they posted these words: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me. Not with someone else. Not somewhere far away. Not when conditions are perfect or when the world finally changes. But here, now, with me.

Let peace begin in the way I speak to myself when I make a mistake. In the breath I take before reacting. In the kindness I choose when patience feels difficult. In the forgiveness I offer when holding onto hurt feels easier.

Let it begin in my home, in the gentleness I bring to those closest to me. In my community, in the compassion I extend to neighbors and strangers alike. In my daily life, in every small choice to respond with understanding instead of judgment, with love instead of fear.

We often look outward, wishing the world would become more peaceful. But the truth is simpler and more challenging: the world becomes peaceful when we do. When each of us takes responsibility for the peace we carry, or fail to carry, in our own hearts.

Each person practicing mindful breathing creates ripples. One person acting with awareness transforms their corner of the world, A family practicing peace becomes a refuge. A community practicing peace transforms a city. And slowly, quietly, persistently, the peace that begins with me spreads to we, and from we to all.

This is not passivity. This is the most active, courageous work we can do. May you, and all beings, be well, happy and at peace.”
End of quote.

The Walk for Peace by the monks from Texas and their dog Aloka is an example of going home by another way. Their message of living with peace, compassion and loving kindness can inspire each of us to go home another way, too.

I also see “going home another way” alive through my friend Matt, who lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Matt shared these words on his Facebook page on Christmas Eve: “Tonight I went to a Christmas Eve service at a church pastored by a friend of mine. It was my first church service since my mom died nearly twelve years ago, and my first since recently coming off an antidepressant that I had been on for twenty three years.

I chose to go alone. Not because I had to, but because I wanted to actually feel some of the loneliness and loss that was in me instead of pretending it wasn’t there.

For the first part of the service, I felt almost nothing. Then we were invited to greet the people around us, and I met the man sitting next to me. I quickly realized that he had a mobility issue. He was there alone too, and we shared that quiet, brave smile people give each other when they’re both trying to be okay when they’re not.

When it was time to stand and sing, he leaned over and said “I’m going to stay seated for this.” Without thinking, I said “I’ll sit with you.”

As soon as everyone else stood, and me and my new friend stayed seated, something opened up in me. As the congregation began singing ‘Hark the Herald Angels Sing,’ the tears came, slow and steady.

But in that moment, I felt what I can only describe as a Divine whisper, a whisper that said 'Matthew, the loneliness you're feeling right now, and even the loneliness that you're feeling on behalf of your new friend, that is exactly where I am. I'm with you in it. You are not alone.'

Tonight," Matt wrote, "even though I let myself feel my loneliness instead of numbing it, I'm reminded of how deeply un-alone I actually am. If this place of honesty is one of the places in which God shows up most fully, and it is, then for tonight, I'm willing to stay with it. And this Christmas, that realization might be my most important gift."

Matt is going home another way, through dealing with his feelings honestly, and being reminded of the presence of God in the midst of the pain.

A third way of going home another way is to follow the advice of Rainn Wilson, who played Dwight on "The Office." Rainn is not only a great actor, but he is a great writer with spiritual insights, and he has a website and podcast called "Soul Boom." One of the suggestions that Dwight recently shared is to evaluate our year through the eyes of a mystic, not an accountant. My tendency, and maybe yours, is to look back on what I accomplished, or didn't accomplish, like an accountant. But when I look back on 2025 through the eyes of a mystic, that is, thinking about ways in which I experienced the presence of God, times in which I felt the Universe aligned within me, then I feel something much more positive, something that reminds me that God is indeed present in my life. Looking at our lives through the eyes of a mystic, and not an accountant, is a good way of going home another way.

Today's story of the Magi began with the wisemen following the star to where the Christ child was. So today, we will each receive a star word when we come for communion. A star word is not a resolution or a goal or some kind of suggestion to improve ourselves. A star word is an invitation. It's a word that might be a guide for us.

And maybe, just maybe, the star word you receive is choosing you. Maybe it's a word that feels comforting, or annoying or maybe it feels like the word knows too much about you. Whatever it may be, allow your word to say what it needs to say to you at this moment.

Lastly, if you follow college football, you know about Fernando Mendoza, the quarterback for Indiana and the recent Heisman Trophy winner. In a number of interviews, Fernando has used a star analogy to explain his success. He recently said: "The only reason we're able to see the stars in the sky is because of the light that each star reflects on the other stars. I'm shining now, but only because there are so many stars around me, including my teammates, my coaches, my family. It's because of them that I'm able to shine."

Dear friends, if we look carefully, you and I are also surrounded by stars that can help us to shine, stars that can remind us that we are God's beloved, stars that can invite us to walk the path of peace, stars that can call us to be vessels of kindness, stars that believe in us even when we struggle to believe in ourselves. So, as we begin this new year, may we trust that God and the goodness of the Universe and the light of the stars that surround us are with us every step of the way, lighting our path, especially

when respond to a call to go home another way, whatever that may be. Amen.