

Pastor's Message - Epiphany (2022)
Matthew 2:1-12

We had our first significant, measurable, shovel-able snow in Waupun this past Sunday into Monday and I fear the bicycle has been hung up until spring. So, Monday I walked into the Church Office instead of biking. I was dismayed and, I confess, judgmental in seeing Christmas trees out on the curb for pickup already that morning. Christmas starts early for the world and then ends early. Some people are already done with Christmas. I think that's a shame.

So, what do we do with Epiphany today? Some of you have perhaps been introduced to Epiphany through the familiar silhouetted-image of Three Wise Men bearing gifts as they followed the Great Star by night. In some cultures, Epiphany is known as the *Day of the Kings (Dia de los Reyes)*. It is also known as Twelfth Day or Twelfth Night, reflecting an old custom of giving a gift for each of the days from December 25 to January 6 for the 12 days of Christmas. The day has special meaning for a number of reasons. Several branches of Christianity celebrate the birth of the Christ Child on January 6 or January 7: the official day of Epiphany and the arrival of the Magi.

The word *epiphany* means *appearance* or *manifestation*. We can think of *epiphany* like *eureka!* or *aha!* Use of this word by some English speakers conjures images of having a light bulb turned on, or of being suddenly able to see something that was once hidden from view.

Many versions of the Bible refer to them as the *Wise Men*. We often forget that these Wise Men or Magi were non-Jews. Older sources suggest that they were priestly descendants of one of the tribes of the Medes known for their knowledge of the stars (astronomy) and their ability to interpret dreams.

Whoever they were, there are things we can learn from the Wise Men.

The Wise Men began their journey because of their beliefs.

It was a common belief that when a world leader like a king was born, a special stellar phenomenon would appear in the sky. The Magi saw something that convinced them that they had seen the long-awaited sign. Historians tell us that the Jews, the Romans, and the Persians were all watching the skies about that time, looking for signs of the birth of an extraordinary king. A few years before, around 11 BC, Halley's Comet had been seen. There were other stellar phenomena, including a bright star, Sirius, which appeared brightly in the daytime instead of at night. The Wise Men saw the star and began their journey.

Their arrival was extraordinary. Astrologers from the east, what we now know as Iraq or Iran, just didn't normally come striding into Jerusalem looking for a newborn child destined to become the new ruler of that nation. If they did, they would have known enough protocol from their own culture that they wouldn't normally start by asking common people and maybe a priest or two where this child might be. Matters of state like this would usually have been handled by an official delegation working through all the

"right" channels. In short, what these men were doing in Jerusalem and how they did it was bound—and maybe even intended--to draw suspicion from the powers that be.

One of the things that is intriguing about this story is the incredibly wrong turn the Magi took as they neared the end of their trip. Instead of following the star to Bethlehem, they stopped off in Jerusalem to ask directions of Herod (which has caused someone to suggest that this is why the Wise Men are famous for being wise in the first place -- they are the only men in history ever known to stop and ask directions). The visit with Herod should not be completely unexpected: after all, they were convinced that they were coming to welcome a new "King of the Jews," presumably Herod's baby son. Oops. With the benefit of 20/20 hindsight, we know the trouble that slip caused.

It wasn't just their mistake that defined the times. There wasn't much brightness in Judea in the time of King Herod, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem - in fact, Herod's reign was an absolute orgy of violence and bloodshed. Full of insecurity, Herod had ordered the killing of his brother-in-law, his uncle, and then his wife. Fearing loss of power, he went on to execute his mother-in-law, a son, and then two more sons. At one point, Caesar Augustus remarked that he would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son!

And this list of murders doesn't even include the massacre of the infants, which Herod ordered in a desperate attempt to kill the baby Jesus. He commanded the slaughter of all the male children in and around Bethlehem who were 2 years old or under ... but fortunately Mary and Joseph had spirited Jesus away to Egypt before the massacre began (Matthew 2:13-18). These were truly dark days.

But in Matthew's story, our Christian Christmas story, Herod is not just a maniacal historical figure. He is also stand-in for the powers of the world. That's why this is not just a nice story that children reenact at Christmas time and a nice story with loved hymns that we observe every year. The dark days of Herod's time persist in the dark days of our time. In our world, just as in the world of Herod and the Magi, there is still violence and war – fear and plotting. There is animosity and mistrust. I expect all of us would like a better year in 2022 than the world had in 2021.

However, as we stand here at the beginning of a new year, it's a good time to think about not just our own personal spiritual journey and how we will grow in our faith but also the ministry of our Church and the faith-projects before us.

- What are the projects the Church is struggling with?
- What's the next step in those projects?
- What are the obstacles for taking that step, or implementing the step?
- What has God called us to do that is suddenly seeming to fall apart?
- What naysaying comments need to be ignored?
- What hindrances are really indicators that we are on the right track?
- What last-stage problems are reminders to call afresh on God?
- What are the projects of the past that we need to let go of?
- What are the essential, Church-defining projects we need to continue?
- What are the new projects God is calling us to start?

Believe this: When God calls us to a task, he gives us his help to finish it. *One* sign of God is that we are led to do work that we did not intend to do. *Another* sign of God is that we are trusted to seek God's help to take the task to completion.

The Magi started out not knowing exactly who they were looking for, where they would find him, or how long it would take them to get to where they were going. But they kept going and did, eventually, find Jesus in a place they did not expect. It can be that way for any of us. At some point, we all see a star, wonder what it means for us and start out on a spiritual journey. We don't know where we are going, what we will find, or how long it will take to get where we're going. In fact, for Christians, we never really finish the journey and for Wesleyan Methodist Christians, life is a never-ending journey of moving on to perfection in love. We believe we'll get there, otherwise we would never even start or continue on, but can't see a moving destination and have to keep going no matter what.

You may remember the apostle Paul modeling such perseverance, writing as he drew near death, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). His words, of course, refer to more than simply completing a mission project or seeking more holiness in living; they refer to the completion of a whole life of discipleship. But how do we attain a life of discipleship other than by completing the "faith projects" along the way? The life of faith is not a 100-yard dash; it's a marathon or more accurately, a steeplechase with hills and puddles and walls to jump over. It's not a tourist jaunt; it's an ongoing pilgrimage.

Nonetheless, there are some shorter races that need to be run enroute -- such as sticking with the not-so-easy task we feel God has called us to do, such as continuing to root out any personal, unrighteous attitudes and behaviors that impede our spiritual growth, such as continuing to work at loving our difficult neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

The Wise Men were committed to the journey -- wherever the star might lead. They set out to find a newborn King by following a star and ended up in finding a baby born to young, relatively poor parents! Not exactly what they expected and not exactly what befit their dignity as priests. They persevered and so must we. Maybe it wasn't as difficult for them as it is for us. Perhaps their world was much simpler with fewer distractions and complications to impede their journey. But when they lost their way, the star was always there to guide them.

We can be confident that the star will always be there to guide us, and we know to be looking for signs of Epiphany! happening right where we are, even or especially if where we are seems gloomy. As we persevere on our own faith journeys, stars appear all the time if we are watching for them. Those stars redirect our paths and guide us to find Jesus again. It's not going to be easy -- it wasn't for the Magi. The Wise Men were willing to follow what they had seen into unknown territory. Their journey took them outside their country and their comfort zone. The Wise Men risked the consequences of disobeying Herod, who was known to behave as a madman when provoked and returned to their country by another way. *The Christian journey, too, is often an off-road excursion.*

The Christian walk can be discouraging. It is not hubris, but an act of faith (if we will live in faith!) to say that God calls through this prophecy to stir from our own depression as church, to live in the way of Jesus, and in so doing to find that he, and we through him, are exactly as he said: the light of the world. Our mutual care for one another and extended to all, our commitment and action that renounces the evil forces of this world and resists injustice and oppression, our praise of God in the midst of suffering and uncertainty, our witness through lives of holiness to the holiness of God, all of these are signs of God's glory shining, if we will see the Epiphany! all around us, and if we will let it shine through us.

Perhaps you remember road trips with your children or maybe your grandchildren and the longer the trip the more likely and more often you will hear the whining of children sitting in the back seat, "Are we there yet?" It can take a while to get to where we're going, but people and churches of faith persevere. God always sends a star to lead the way.

"Look around," the prophets command! God's light always shines through the darkness and the reign of God prevails, even in the most dire of circumstances. This is what gives us hope. This is what helps us stand up to our fears. This is what gives us courage to go forth in the name of Christ.

Epiphany! was not a "once and done" moment with a star, a ruler, some astrologers, and a young child in a town in Judea. Epiphany! is the ongoing outpouring of effects of God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, then, now, and into the age to come. So, remember the past, celebrate the present, and celebrate at Communion in anticipation of what Epiphany! will ultimately bring to pass.

There are lessons to be learned from the Magi and these days, as we approach the uncertainty of a new year, we need all the help we can get.

* Lesson 1: Like the Wise Men, be ready to meet God in the midst of your everyday activities, then get up and **follow the star**;

* Lesson 2: What you believe should determine how you act. Be willing to put feet on your faith; then get going and **follow the star**;

* Lesson 3: The Bible is a wonderful resource if you want to know God's direction for your life; get good directions, then **follow the star**;

* Lesson 4: Do not worry about what gifts you bring; each is appropriate in its own way as you **follow the star**.

So where is the star leading you and where is the star leading your church. What new projects is your church being led to consider and to take up in faith? What is the surprising, extraordinary, and unbelievable word from the Lord for this next year, and who is speaking it? Who and what around you is shining with the Epiphany! light of God's glory in the midst of the thick darkness surrounding us? God has a plan and, as evidenced by our continued presence here, will be faithful to complete it. Follow the star wherever it leads and at the end of the journey, you will find Christ.