

Christmas 2B 2022 Sermon

January 2, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12 *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him." When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet: `And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'"* Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared; and he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

On Christmas Eve, we heard the story about the shepherds watching their flocks by night, when an angel appears to them, announcing the birth of the Messiah, a child wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The shepherds go to the manger, worship the child, and then return to their fields.

But what happens to them *after* they go back to their flocks? Are they the same people they were before, or have they been changed by the heavenly vision and their visit to the manger? Is there a softening of their hearts, more joy in their lives, more care and compassion for one another? We are left wondering, for the Bible never mentions those shepherds again.

And in *today's* Gospel, we read of the Wise Men, or Magi – magi being Zoroastrian priests from ancient Persia. They have seen a strange and compelling star in the sky, and they have followed it to Jerusalem, where they ask King Herod where the new king of the Jews has been born. Herod, having consulted the chief priests and scribes, tells the Wise Men to go to Bethlehem, and when they find the Christ Child, to return and tell him. The Magi find the Child, and lay before him their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then, we are told, "being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

But what happens to them *after* they return home? Are **they** the same as they were before? Or have they been changed by their long journey, having followed

the mysterious star, and then seeing the child and laying their gifts before him? After they return home by another way, do they see the world in another way? Do they see themselves and their neighbors in another way? Are they, as a result of their journey, more loving, more compassionate? Do they see the face of the Christ Child in other people whom they meet?

Mennonite pastor Joanna Harader imagines what it must have been like for those Wise Men, those Magi. She writes: “The magi’s star is a faint light—tricky to notice, hard to follow. They make it as far as Jerusalem before they have to stop and ask directions. Then, thanks to Herod, they continue on to Bethlehem and find the place where the star rests...

“[D]espite the dim, fickle nature of the light... despite the exhaustion of their camels and the blisters on their feet, they know that this is where God has led them...”¹ (unquote)

I looked up the distance between the capital city of ancient Persia (Persepolis) and Bethlehem, and it is roughly 1000 miles. 1000 miles. A long, hard, exhausting journey, indeed, for those magi! All because of a star which Pastor Harader describes as “a faint light – tricky to notice, hard to follow.” And yet they go, despite the uncertainty. Despite the dimness of the light, they trust that God is in it, guiding them. They risk the journey which, if we read the story carefully, may have taken them two years.²

And, my friends, after reading this story again this year, I have come to realize that **we** are like those Magi! For we, too, have been on a long, hard, exhausting journey through this pandemic – two years old and still counting. **Our** journey has not involved long-distance travel, as it did for the Magi, but it has been no less difficult, no less exhausting. And we, like the Magi, have been travelling through foreign territory, a pandemic such as none of us has seen before. If God has sent **us** a star to guide us through this pandemic, the light of that star has seemed – for me, at least – “faint... tricky to notice, hard to follow.”

And yet, at the same time, we, also, have journeyed to Bethlehem, just eight days ago, on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day! We offered the Christ Child the gift of our lives, and he has been born, once again, in our hearts, in our minds, in our souls! And, like the Magi, we have “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” And the question for us, as for the shepherds and the Wise Men, is: has our journey to Bethlehem changed us?

It is still the Christmas season, my friends, and, as I said in my sermon Christmas Eve, Christmas is perhaps the **only** time of the year when our culture allows us to openly talk about the reality of the spiritual. Only at Christmas is it OK to talk about heavenly signs, God becoming a baby, silent, holy nights -- and nobody laughs! Despite all its commercialization, Christmas still has the scent of the holy about it, even in our secularized culture. People who may never **think** of going to

church the rest of the year are drawn to church at Christmas. The spiritual reality manifest in this Christmas season is that strong.

And, my friends, if we choose, we can let the spiritual power of this Christmas season *change* us.

This Thursday, the Christmas Season will be over, and we will return to what our church calendar calls “Ordinary Time.” Yet, like the Wise Men, we cannot return to our “own country” by the **same** way. Our old, pre-pandemic lives no longer exist; the *world* that we knew before the pandemic no longer exists. And the institutions that we knew pre-pandemic – including the Church – must adjust to this new world, this new reality, also.

In T.S. Eliot’s poem, “The Journey of the Magi,” one of the Wise Men reflects on their journey back to Persia, by another way: “We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, /But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...”³ The Magi are no longer at ease with the old order of things, for they have been changed by their journey, having trusted the dim star, and having seen the **new** order of things – the Kingdom of God – in the face of the Christ Child.

My friends, we are living in an in-between time, between our past world pre-pandemic and our future world post-pandemic. And in this liminal time, when we no longer live in the comfortable stability of the old dispensation and have yet to see what our lives will be like in a post-pandemic world, in this in-between time, the potential, the opportunity for changing our perspective, changing our lives, changing our world so as to reveal the Kingdom of God in our midst, enter into the Reign of God, has never been greater.

We have an unprecedented opportunity, my friends, and a choice: As the pandemic winds down, we can try to reconstruct “the old dispensation,” the old order of things, pre-pandemic; or, we can, like the Wise Men, trust the light that God is shining for us in the midst of this pandemic darkness, even though that light may seem, at times, “faint... tricky to notice, and hard to follow.”

Come Thursday, the Christmas Season will officially be over. Many of us have **already** packed Christmas away. Have we packed away the awe and wonder and potential of Christmas along with the lights and the ornaments? Have we packed away the courage to be changed by the Christ Child, along with the wrapping paper and bows?

As the poinsettias begin to wilt, the greens dry out and drop their needles, the Christmas season ends and we leave the manger to go back to our “ordinary” lives, will we return by the same route we came? Or will we have been changed by our visit to the manger – being more forgiving when we have been wronged; more willing to seek Christ in others; more compassionate toward the poor, the

sick, the lonely, the imprisoned; more joyful and loving; more grateful for what we have; more conformed to the mind of Christ?

AMEN

1 Joanna Harader, from *The Christian Century*, December 22, 2015

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/january-3-epiphany-sunday-matthew-21-12-isaiah-601-6>

2 In Matthew 2:7, we read, “Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and *learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.*” Then, in Matthew 2:16, we read: “When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and *killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.* We can assume, then, that the star first appeared to the Wise Men about 2 years before they meet Herod.

3 <https://poetryarchive.org/poem/journey-magi/>