

Happy New Year, and Happy Epiphany one day early!

The Christian Church celebrates Epiphany tomorrow on January 6. Epiphany means “manifestation or appearance.” In this case, it refers to God manifesting Godself in human history. The Christian holiday primarily commemorates the “wise men” coming from the East to worship Christ the newborn king.<sup>1</sup>

I trust that 2024 ended well and that, despite the bitter cold today, things are going well in 2025. Anna and I had a lovely trip to Mesa, Arizona, last week, for a little family-of-origin reunion at my sister’s place. Eating meals outside in the sun seems a distant memory now!

Maybe some of you traveled over the holidays too, and if not over the holidays, I’m sure we’ve all experienced the thrill of travel—friends, family, new places, new faces, and of course the agony of travel—lost luggage, canceled flights, flat tires, wrong turns. As we speak, my bonus daughter Nadia is stuck in Amsterdam due to bad weather trying to get to France for her study abroad semester. Whatever the case, we seldom if ever travel without a specific destination in mind.  
I’m going to Mesa, to my sister’s place.  
I’m going to the Hilton in Puerto Vallarta for some R and R.  
I’m going to Idegenda, Tanzania, to visit our sister congregation.

We would think it odd, wouldn’t we, if we when asked where a friend was traveling to, they would just simply say, “Texas.”  
Well where in Texas?  
Dunno, somewhere in Texas. We’ll see.  
You driving or flying?  
Oh, driving.  
When will you know you are where you want to go?

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<sup>1</sup>Fun fact: We don’t know how many Magi there were. We only know from Matthew 2 that they brought three gifts!

Not sure, guess we'll just know. . .

No, we travel with destinations in mind.

The Magi in our gospel this morning were traveling, with a vague sense of where they were going,

Though they had a pretty significant guide in the form of a star in the west,  
but even that is hard to imagine as being overly specific.

We would have a hard time following a star to a specific building I should think. . .

But the Magi don't.<sup>2</sup>

Magi is the plural of "magos," in Greek, literally, "wise man," and refers to a member of a class of discerning, perceptive men, astrologers, or magicians. In the New Testament, it specifically denotes the wise men from the East who visited Jesus after his birth, guided by a star. These individuals were likely scholars or priests with knowledge of astronomy and astrology, who interpreted celestial events as significant. This Greek word magi survives to this day in our words "magic" and "magician."

It's fitting, then, that Matthew has Magi from the East following a star.

These Zoroastrian astrologer-priests followed the religion founded by the priest Zarathustra, known to the Greeks as Zoroaster.

Zoroastrians believe in one God who created the world  
and revealed the truth through Zoroaster.

They believe in the dichotomy of good and evil,  
represented by light and darkness.

So Zoroastrian priests seeking light is "on brand,"

and here Matthews tells the story this way to show the cosmic and universal significance of the babe in a manger.

This gift a son from God will be THE light of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> The story of the Magi has been retold in T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi," and by the opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors." Monty Python's Flying Circus told a version of the story in their movie, "The Life of Brian" – the Magi arrived at Brian's home first, then took their gifts back when they realized their mistake! And singer-songwriter James Taylor has sung about them in the song, "Home By Another Way," from which I've taken the title of this sermon.

If the Magi followed the light, they certainly encountered some darkness along the way. Magi literally means “wise men,” and the fact that they are all *men* comes as a bit of a surprise, because they stop and ask for directions. . . ! (*I kid!*)

The star guided their journey from the East, and they reached Jerusalem, where they headed straight to the ruler of the region, King Herod, also known as Herod the Great.

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” they ask,  
“For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

This surprisingly or unsurprisingly frightens Herod, the King,  
*and, the text says, “all Jerusalem with him.” Really? “All Jerusalem”?*  
*That seems weird.*

Despite his fear, or really *because* of his fear,  
Herod checks with his Jewish intelligentsia,  
the chief priests and scribes,  
who deduce from Micah 2 that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

In secret, Herod directs the Magi south on a two-hour journey on foot to the south of the little town of Bethlehem.

Then helpful Herod then gives the Magi these instructions:

“Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

Herod seems helpful, right? He’s helped them GPS their way to Bethlehem, and just wants a favor in return: let me know where I can find this Child King.

But he’s lying. He doesn’t want to pay homage, he wants to eliminate any threat to his power.

And is it so hard to imagine someone in power wanting to remain in power, and doing anything they can to keep their power and privilege? Not hard at all, right?

Herod, who was wealthy and powerful, wanted the Magi to do his bidding so he could retain his privilege and exercise his power.

Such is his fear of losing his power that later on in Matthew 2 we read of the so-called “killing of the innocents.” In contrast to what he tells the Magi, that he wants to go and worship the Christ Child, Herod was infuriated when he learns that he had been tricked by the wise men, And so he killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the timeline that he had learned from the wise men.

That’s a lot of fear, and hatred, and cruelty, and murder.

After finding the child king, the Magi are warned of the imminent danger in a dream, and the Magi smartly *went home by another way*.

What might we make of this alternate route home taken by the Magi?

Perhaps this: Worship is dangerous, then and now.

The powerful and the privileged are threatened by those who stand for peace and justice, those who stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. The powerful don’t like being reminded that, and not a few of them have abused their power, taken advantage of the weak in order to amass their power and privilege.

This altering of their plans after worshipping Jesus gives us a nice image today. Arlington Hills has been faithfully worshipping for more than 115 years. The church has adapted and changed, and more change lies in our future.

As we look to the new year, we know the challenges confronting our church and society. In the face of these challenges, what new “roads,” and new “ways” might we need to consider in our work to be faithful workers in God’s Kingdom?

How have we been formed by our worship of the infant king, whose birth we just celebrated last month, to think about other ways?

In what ways do we *resist* destructive and oppressive powers, principalities and people in our world today?

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If you don't know James Taylor's song about the Magi, *Home by Another Way*, you should give it a listen. The lyrics about Herod seem fitting for the challenges, even threats, we will encounter in the coming year. It also challenges us to have the courage to love like God has loved us, and to work in the world for peace and justice. Here is a sample:

*Those magic men, the Magi  
Some people call them wise  
Or oriental, even kings  
Well anyway, those guys  
They visited with Jesus  
They sure enjoyed their stay  
Then warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme  
They went home by another way*

*Yes, they went home by another way  
Home by another way  
Maybe me and you can be wise guys too  
And go home by another way*

And maybe we, too, need to travel another way, a way that pays proper homage to the Child King,  
and undercuts the cruel hatred of all tyrants,  
and powers and principalities,  
who would sacrifice others for their own gain.

And as we travel new roads in order to be faithful to our calling as followers of Christ,  
may we, like the Magi, open our treasure chests and offer our precious gifts,  
and in so doing, worship Christ the new-born king.

Thanks be to God, Amen.