

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

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Going Off Course

If you've had a youth go through the youth group program since I've been here, you know that every year at our Christmas party, I make them take a quiz. I'm not kidding. They think they're coming to a fun party with gift exchanges and games and food, which does happen, but I make them take a quiz first. It's a 25-question quiz, multiple choice because I'm nice, and comes with 5 bonus questions. They pass it to their neighbor when they're all done and we grade them. Prizes are awarded for the most correct answers. This was the ninth year I've given what I call the "Christmas Bible Quiz". And it's exactly what the title indicates. The questions all relate to the actual biblical story and details surrounding Christ's birth.

And so, older youth in the youth group, like Ainsley here, know that there are a lot of things we think we know about the birth story of Christ but most of them come from songs, movies, and ancient stories and not from the Bible itself. In fact, the Bible really gives us sparing details when it comes to the story surrounding Christ's birth. So when it comes to the magi, "the wise men from the East," if you were to take this quiz yourself, you'd find that there's a whole lot we don't actually know. For example, we sing "We Three Kings" but scripture never tells us how many there were. We assume three because there were three gifts, but we don't actually know. And speaking of the same song, we assume these wise ones were kings, but from the Greek translation, they were more likely astrologers, magi. Manger scenes place these wise ones with the baby in the stable, but according to what we just read, it was after Jesus was born that these magi enter Jerusalem, and when they finally find him, they entered a house, so it's more likely that Jesus was maybe toddling around by this point. There's a lot of speculation about the story of Christ's birth and these wise ones, which makes sense because we want the story to make sense.

Here's what we do know – they came from the East. They were strangers. Foreigners. They looked different. They probably wore clothes that marked them as being from somewhere else. They spoke a different language, and when they spoke the language of the local community, it was difficult to understand them. But they were special somehow. They were not Jewish, but Gentiles. They had been on a long journey, following an unusual star they saw at its rising — and reading up on their prophecies, they end up in Jerusalem — a region of power and prosperity at the time under the rule of King Herod. It's the logical place that nations would probably be drawn to and gathered up, where the wealth of nations would gather as we heard

from the prophet Isaiah. Something about that star signaled to these magi that a new king had been born.

So imagine with me now these strangers, these wise ones from the East, as they enter the bustling and prosperous area of Jerusalem and cause a commotion. Not only because they are clearly foreigners, but they are walking around town asking this one question: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We want to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. Can we just pause here and note again that the most powerful man in the world is actually threatened and frightened by a baby ..because some dudes tell him that this is a king?

It seems like an innocent question, but it IS a strange one coming from strangers. And they are making people nervous. There's already a king of the Jews in reign. King Herod has done amazing things like rebuilding the temple and bringing prosperity to their region. But he's also ruthless and does not hesitate to rid of anyone who threatens his power. King Herod is not the only one who is frightened by these magi. All of Jerusalem is also frightened. Why are these strangers in their land asking for the king of their people? What do they know about the Messiah? Don't these guys know what Herod is going to do to them if he gets wind of this?

What is it about these magi, these strangers from another land that give them so much credibility that their question poses a real threat? Basically, why are they being taken so seriously? Couldn't they be shoved off as being outsiders who know nothing about them and who their people are?

And maybe that's exactly why the people and the king are afraid, because these outsiders and seekers know more than you would think that they would know about their own prophecies. King Herod does get wind of this, and before he meets them, he calls together the chief priests and the scribes and asks about this prophecy of the Messiah and where he is to be born. And he finds out that the Messiah isn't going to be born in a great kingdom where the wealth of the nations will gather as prophesied in Isaiah, but instead he will be born in Bethlehem. And so the correct prophecy from the prophet Micah is told to the king – Bethlehem, from a little town called Bethlehem just six miles south of this mighty city — and the image of the ruler is not one of a king seated on a throne as everyone would expect, including these strangers, but an image of a shepherd. Interestingly, when King Herod finally does summon and meet with them, he is the one that tells them the correct prophecy and tells them where to go.

From Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the magi were only six miles off course. But those six miles meant a world of difference in what the image of a king would be for the people.

They could have been disappointed. Entering a humble home with a mother and child in Bethlehem — not in a fancy palace, but from humble means — you know it was not what they were expecting. They were willing to go off course, continue what had already been a long journey, and be open to whatever and wherever their path and that bright shining star would lead them. And scripture tells us that they were overjoyed.

We have entered into in a new year. It's 2022 you all. And I think if you're feeling anything like I'm feeling, maybe we could use a dose of inspiration from these magi today. Because, quite frankly, it's hard to be excited about the possibility of what this new year could be especially when we already know what the last two plus years have been like. We could start out discouraged, or we could begin hopeful.

Because friends, for unto us a child has been born, and like I said on Christmas Eve, anytime a child is born, that is good news of hope and possibility. It also means a reordering of life as we know it. We may have to go off course of what we had planned or intended to adjust to what that new life in our midst means. And so I want to invite us to do that again in this Christmas and Epiphany season.

Our challenge, then, living in a world that needs some goodness and light, is not only to reflect the light that shines on us, but also to find those corners and spaces where we wouldn't necessarily look for light. To listen and watch for the strangers and outsiders who will guide us to the light and possibility.

And I'll be honest, the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, a rural, dusty, unnoticed and unpretentious place six miles south of Jerusalem doesn't seem to offer much for us. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that "we can choose a return to normalcy in a triumphalist mode, a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions." Friends, we can receive life given in vulnerability. These magi — what's amazing is that they don't resist this alternative but go on six miles more from the palace to the village. "Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganize their wealth and learning, and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials." (Walter Brueggemann).

Sisters and brothers and siblings in Christ, in this new year, can we too reorganize our wealth and learning and reorient ourselves around a baby with no credentials?

Around areas and corners and places the world refuses to go or to see? Because the truth is, most of us are probably looking in the wrong place for what we think will bring us peace and joy and love. We might be six miles off course. We have to be willing to go off course again and maybe again in order to find what we are seeking. Today, we are invited to take the journey — to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency — a way beyond security and prosperity. To travel the road of vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, and justice. It's not going to be easy. Now and again, the stars disappear. Our feet will get blisters and the journey will feel too far and lonely. But when you are feeling that, maybe especially when you are, remember you are not alone. You do not have to do it alone.

The Rev. Sarah Are Speed shares in an excerpt of her poem, "I Imagine" these words of the journey of the Magi:

*"...However the road unfolded, I imagine it was not easy.
I imagine all of this, not because I've chased stars, but because I have dreamed.
And these dreams for justice make the Magi's story my own.
For every time we fight for justice, we start in the dark.
We hug loved ones and say, "there's a light in the darkness, I must chase that."
We walk until we're tired and then we keep walking.
We laugh at the open sky as a form of resistance.
We pray in the night for signs of more light.
and no matter how important the journey is, and no matter how much progress
we make,
The journey to justice is never easy.
And so I pray that maybe one day, we will be like the Magi and will walk
ourselves into the light. Until then, don't forget-there's a light in the darkness.
We must chase that."*

Friends, the star is shining. Epiphany celebrates the coming of God's light into the world, a humble light born in the person of Jesus. The light of the world is not contained or limited to any one nation or people, but is generously extended to all in love.

Today at this Table, that's what we celebrate again. Because this is one of the few places where the feast is not contained or limited to any one nation or people, but is generously extended to all in love. It's for Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and angels — it is for those outsiders — the magi, the strangers — and this table is even for the Herods, the ones who manipulate and deceive, just as much as it is for the ones who love. And it is at this Table when the bread is given and the cup shared that we discover just a bit of that light of love made real and of a world made whole.

My friends, today, let's be willing to go off course, even just a little bit, to see where the road may lead us. It might just bring us to the gift we did not even know we needed. To love unexpected. And a joy we didn't even know we could have. As we begin a new year, let's learn a different way home.
Amen.