



## Sermon

Matthew 2:1-12  
The Epiphany of Our Lord  
January 6, 2008  
Historic St. George's UMC  
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

"Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves. They were in the right place." – (Matthew 2:9-10, *The Message*)

I read something quite interesting written by that famous author Anonymous. "Do you know what would have happened if it had been wise women instead of men. They would have stopped to ask for directions, arrived on time, helped with the delivery of the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and there WOULD be peace on earth."

Chuckles aside, Matthew tells us that seeing the star, the magi (that's what Matthew calls them – we translate that into "wise men" or "kings") were beside themselves with joy.

Why?

"They entered the house and saw the child on the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshipped him. They opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh." (Matthew 2:11, *The Message*)

Why?

How did these eastern astrologers know just from looking at a star that the child Jesus was to be "king of the Jews?" Erase the nativity scene burned in your brain. Remember, this is the Gospel of Matthew, not Luke. There is no manger. There are no angels lighting up the sky. These eastern astrologers were not Jews. They were gentiles. They had no access to the prophetic predictions of the Hebrew scripture concerning the birth of Jesus. Where did they get the overwhelming joy the Bible talks about?

## Star Search

I'm thinking they were joyful because they were on a journey. They were joyful because looking at the child Jesus; the magi somehow knew they were at their long awaited destination. Colleague scholars from the east stayed home. They did not journey. They refused to go off on some wild camel ride on the basis of nothing more than a new star. But Matthew's magi – we really don't know whether there were three or thirteen of them, Matthew only says they offered three kinds of gifts – were the sort of people looking for something, willing to risk leaving home and routine, brave enough to venture a search. On the way they got to the goal of their search. So they felt joy.

I don't know about you, but the older I get, or the more settled and comfortable I become, I'd rather get a root canal from the dentist than make a journey without some specific directions and well-expected outcomes. One of my favorite Christmas gifts this year (or should I say Christmas toys?) was a GPS (Global Positioning System) system for my car. One challenging thing about a journey is that you are at the mercy of the trek. With my GPS system, I'll be more in control. I won't have to leave the comfort of my vehicle and waste time asking for directions. But the truth be told, every trip is a risk.

Every baby is a risk, too. The birth of Jesus set a whole train of difficult, messy, even bloody events in motion. Bruce told us about one of them last week, about Herod's slaughter of the innocent children in and around Bethlehem as the established King of the Jews sought to nip this new King of the Jews thing in the bud.

Here's the thing...The child the magi discovered was not the end of a journey but the beginning of one. The rest of Gospel of Matthew, the other three gospels as well, share this same idea – meeting Jesus is not the end of a journey but the start of one for those who follow him. After all, we just don't

“believe in” Jesus, or believe that Jesus was God’s own flesh and blood. We follow him. And following him, Jesus takes us places we would never have gone without his leading. Like the magi who saw his star rise in the east and followed it. We just like them are stargazers and sojourners. We saw a light on the horizon and followed where it led, down unfamiliar roads as often as not.

Matthew introduces us to another character in this Epiphany story – King Herod. There, somewhere under the shining star is the child Jesus, the King of the Jews. But up at the palace, only about eight miles away in Jerusalem mind you, backed by his own soldiers and some Roman garrisons, was Herod, the other King of the Jews. Herod was put in power by the Romans. When he heard about the one whose star had risen in the east, “the one born King of the Jews,” Herod got very nervous. The star that struck the magi with overwhelming joy struck Herod with fear.

Usually when Herod got fearful nervous somebody had a problem, somebody had great pain, somebody was gonna pay. You know the story. First King Herod got the magi to give him the baby’s exact whereabouts. Then, when the magi evaded him, there was a blood bath.

Herod was one of history’s great villains. The record says he not only murdered many of his good friends but even his wife and three of his own sons. Living by fear will do that to you. He was threatened by about everybody, and it was said of him in his own day, that it was better to be Herod’s son than his son.

But Matthew says it wasn’t only Herod who got nervous when Jesus was born. Matthew says, “Herod was terrified and all Jerusalem with him.” (Matthew 2:3) All of Jerusalem trembled because all of Jerusalem knew how bloody Herod could be when he was out of sorts. But think of this... Even Herod could not have pulled-off much of what he did without help, without political support, without people trapped by fear acquiescing or looking the other way. He wasn’t the best of kings, but we know how it goes – better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know. The present order of things may not be so great, but at least we’re secure the

way it is. We’ll trust our GPS systems for the rest.

So we’ve got quite a story here: The magi and their wildly happy joy, King Herod and all of Jerusalem filled with unsettling, even life-taking fear.

Where do you find your place in this story? With exceeding joy? With nervous fear? Honestly, we are a mixture of both. The star of Jesus beckons us on a journey and as with every trip, there is the fear AND joy, anticipation and anxiety.

Living in a powerful nation, we can surely identify with King Herod. With the force of armies – his own and Rome’s, and the religious establishment under his control, Herod was still afraid. Afraid of a baby! And we, powerful as we are, with the strongest military force in the world, are still a people full of fear. Just like “all Jerusalem” was afraid, we are afraid, even with all our power. Ratcheting up for a presidential election this year, some candidates are playing-on these very fears in exchange for votes. Fears can and have led us to do terribly violent acts.

So the child Jesus becomes a source of judgment for us, joy, yes, but also in him we see a mirror of ourselves. When we are afraid, we are not at our best.

But the search for Jesus didn’t only bring out the worst of Herod and the powers that be, it also brought out the best in the magi. We are also like them.

In most of the gospel stories, Jesus comes to people. He reaches out, goes forth, and intrudes into lives, moves into villages and homes. But in Matthew’s story of the magi, people come to Jesus. The magi take a long journey (can you think of anyone in the whole Bible who traveled any further?) to get to Jesus.

In that journeying, the magi are a model for us. They are a model for all those who attempt to move forward with God, who go forth on a search for something better in life, something more, something deeper with God. They are ones who finally find joy coming to Jesus.

You might say that here at church on any Sunday there are two kinds of people. There are those who have arrived. They have been

on a journey, but having found what they were looking for, they are AT their destination. They have joy. They have found their heart's desire or at least some good part of it. Like riding in car as a child? All the fidgety and whining "How much longer" turns into "We're here! We're here!" Joy is the emotion at the successful end of a journey.

A second group of us at church on any Sunday are those of us at the beginning, or in the middle of a journey toward Jesus or seeking God. Often the most difficult part of a journey is the beginning or middle of the trip. There is anxiety about whether we're on the right track, or when or how we'll reach the destination. Are we ever going to get there? Will it be worth the perils and pains when we do? Fear goes along with journey to.

Joy and fear, two conflicting yet complimentary emotions can be found here at church any Sunday morning. So it goes with sojourners, travelers. And according to the gospels, all of us who walk with Jesus are in "follow" not "stand-still" mode.

Ah, but for the magi, this child and the star-crossed journey he calls them to undertake is more a source of great joy than merely a cause for deep fear. And seeing him and opening their presents in his presence they "departed by another road for their own country." (Matthew2:12)

The Epiphany question for us is all wrapped up in our willingness to go on that journey – even by the other roads, if necessary – with joy. Can we relinquish comfort and control to go where the star and its Lord lead us? Will we rise-up as individuals and community with a new sense of adventure, forsaking what's cozy and go forth led by God's light?

If you ask me, that's the chief requirement to be Christian – the willingness to go on a journey. Not having rock solid certainty about the creeds or what's in them. Not

believing a certain way. Not doing certain things and swearing-off doing others. Not having all the answers. Faith isn't always in the knowing as much as it is in the seeking, moving toward Jesus.

How sad for the church and people of faith who think that what we're here for is settling down and in as if we are at the end of the journey with God rather than its beginning, as if we're the followers of a dead Lord instead of one who is born again and again, who makes us born again and again, a sometimes demanding, course-changing savior who leads us forward, and in whose service is high adventure.

God of star-lit journeys and  
star-struck travelers  
be our ever near companion  
spreading the road before us with surprise  
and adventure.

Free the paths from harm and evil,  
escort us through the inevitable twists and turns  
with holy spirits and angelic messengers.

Keep us packed-up with hearts full of  
wonder,  
a sense of the holiness of all things we will  
encounter,  
a willingness to stick with it,  
a mystic map for reading the invisible  
meanings  
in disappointments, delays, and bad weather  
and enough joy to overtake the fear.

Awake us to your sacred presence and  
accompanying love  
that in all that happens – the beautiful and  
the bad –  
we will follow the star of who and whose we  
are.

Amen.

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