

Epiphany
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GOSPEL

Matthew 2:1-12

The holy gospel according to Saint Matthew, the second chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “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.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

There is a world...ruled by men who are as afraid as they are powerful...and the more powerful they become, the more afraid it seems they are...because they know...and they are afraid that everyone else might know...that they are only men, after all. Yet, somehow, they are also so convinced they are worthy of more than they ever get that the threat of any of it being taken away makes them do terrible, foolish things.

There is a world like that. And it is this one.

And it has been that way since the days of King Herod and before...and last time I checked...it was still much more that way than I would wish.

If we are honest, Epiphany isn't just strange travellers with camels and rich, royal gifts. Epiphany is also a time when God's revelation and presence are met with the worst humanity has to offer...in the person of a king who would even slaughter children before allowing a threat to his power to rise.

But he has misjudged the star that has risen. He has not understood what the wise ones who came from so far away seemed to know so deeply within themselves.

He doesn't understand that there is a king now in the world who would choose to die before he would ever kill...that would be born in dirt and poverty and endure any indignity to be close to the ones he both rules and serves...that would become a refugee...that would find power in love and weakness...that would know and show how the things he most treasures multiply when given away...and shrink when hoarded. And they are the things that matter most.

The rulers of this world who are captive to fear don't seem to understand that knocking others down doesn't make them taller. But the one who the magi have come to find will never try to be above anyone, though he has been above and before and around us all...from the beginning of time. He will not live this life so he can be the biggest or best and brightest.

Though he is. All those things.

It is hard for me to imagine myself into Epiphany's story, in some ways. I don't know about you. Of course, I'd like to be something like those wise ones...the magi...who were watching closely enough to spot the wild star...and were wise enough to understand it...and were brave enough both to follow it...and then to find a new way home when the time came.

That final verse is the phrase really captures me this year..."And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."

They went home by another road. I don't know about you...but I think I've nearly worn ruts into the pavement of the roads I travel. I go to work...to the store...and home again a certain way at a certain time...it's like my car can steer itself. Has that ever happened to you? You start driving or walking and stop thinking...and just find yourself where you're supposed to be?

Once, when I was in college, kind of the opposite happened to me. I was going to meet my parents at the lake place in Wisconsin where we always went growing up...and the trip started on the same highway I would have taken to drive back to school in Minnesota. I was probably only an hour away from the Minnesota border (and well over an hour past my turn) when I realized that I wasn't going where I was supposed to. My familiar path drove me, instead of me driving it. And my poor sister was just along for a much longer road trip than she planned on...

I wonder if there are times in life when I keep going home by the road I know without really even listening or seeing whether it is still the right way to go.

I wonder what it was like to hear the instruction: find a different way home.

I have no sense of direction...Put me two turns off my usual route, and I'll be lost in my own neighborhood. Finding a different way home sounds pretty scary to me, with the cloudy mental map I've got.

These wise travellers seem like better navigators than me. But I wonder if there was ever a part of the journey home where they felt lost, even so close to the familiar. I know I feel that way sometimes. And in these days when we can look to the leaders of the world and see that the Herods are still in seats of power, and we might also be asked to find new ways to walk through the landscape of our lives. From what we buy and who it benefits or harms...to how we speak to or about one another...to whether we are

awake enough to engage our political leaders and hold them responsible for caring for the least of these in our midst. The fact that so much of our lives can also remain the same almost makes it harder, I think, to walk through our days in different ways so we won't be helpers of Herod.

This is something I've tried to begin to learn in listening to people of color calling those of us who are white to work to dismantle racist and white supremacist systems...and I know I go on autopilot too often...I haven't learned that new way home yet.

It's part of the work we are doing to live into our identity as a church that embraces and celebrates LGBTQ+ siblings and their unique manifestation of God's image in our world. We can keep learning new ways and new words that inscribe a wider circle into which more beloved children of God are welcomed. It's a new way home.

In the end, though, it frightens me to think that it is up to us to succeed the way the magi did. To find and follow the star to begin with...to find the new way home. Because I know I'm going to keep going on autopilot...or fail to be brave enough to defy the powers of the world.

So, I am perhaps most glad that we hear the good news today that God flings that wild star so high into the heavens that people from far away...far from where we might imagine the center of God's action to be...see and are drawn into what God is doing. Sometimes the brave ones arrive from outside of who we know and what we expect. And God is drawing a circle wider than the arc of the horizon...and it holds all the children of earth. We are being made one with each other by the journey of this star. And God is sending us from so far away to each other as witnesses to God's power...

In the stranger and outsider, we might see a new prophet...a new teacher. We might find new wisdom so beyond our imagining it seems like magic. We might see the magi, too. They are still following the star, bringing Christ gifts and praise. So if we can't find our new way home...maybe we can look for the ones who seem to have a keen sense of the holy...and maybe also a keen sense of direction. And, failing that, we can look up even higher to the night sky...and see what stars God has hung there to shine for us and show us the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.