

Christmas 2 2021
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Jeremiah 31:7-14; Matt 2:1-12
January 3, 2021, St. John's Sharon, Pandemic Worship Service

Happy New Year! I think the story of the magi going to find the baby Jesus and pay him homage offers us counsel as we begin the New Year in the midst of a pandemic, while also facing a variety of other social and, for many of us, personal challenges.

Paying close attention to what Matthew writes about the magi in the gospel this morning is helpful. (To be honest, paying close attention to scripture is always helpful). Many of the images we see in stories about the wise ones coming to Bethlehem show them following a star the entire way from their home country to the manger where Jesus lay. But that is not quite what Matthew says happened.

The magi from the East show up at King Herod's palace in Jerusalem and say that there is now a child who is born King of the Jews and that they know this because they saw his star at its rising. They didn't follow a star from Persia or wherever they were all the way to Jerusalem. Instead, they saw an incredible celestial event in the sky, and their learning told them that this particular flash of light meant that a new king was born in Israel. So they did what important people were supposed to do when a new king is born. You go to the palace in his capital city and bring him gifts. Because let's face it, you can't get on the good side of a new king too early, and if you are the one that brings him his favorite binky, he might remember that when you need a favor later.

So the wise men go to see King Herod in Jerusalem. If the star was guiding them the entire way, they would have gone right to Bethlehem, but they weren't following the star. They saw the star at its rising, but maybe it had set again for a while, or was stuck behind clouds, or couldn't be seen for a couple of weeks because the moon was too bright. Or maybe the magi just assumed they knew where to go once they saw step one and weren't paying too much attention afterwards. All we know is that they end up in Jerusalem where they expect to see a newborn baby and a proud royal father and mother.

Instead they find scheming, jealous, scared Herod whose scribes determine that the baby will be born in nearby Bethlehem, the city of David. So the wise ones set out again, walking the few miles toward Jesus' location. Now the star, which scripture tells us they had seen at its rising but doesn't mention that they had seen since, now the star appears again to them. The star goes ahead of them and stops right above where the baby is. The magi rejoice, enter the house, see Jesus and Mary, kneel down and pay homage to the new King of Israel, and offer gifts.

These gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh are often seen as having symbolic value. Gold is a kingly treasure, frankincense is appropriate for worship of God, and myrrh is a burial spice indicating Jesus' crucifixion. These valuables would also come in handy when the Holy Family has to flee to Egypt as refugees from Herod's persecution.

Once the magi offer gifts, they go back home by a different route, since God told them in a dream not to return to King Herod.

Like the Magi, I think much of our lives involves setting out on adventures that seem clear at the outset, then get very muddled in the middle before we find clarity again later about where we are meant to go. I think marriage is like that for many people. People fall in love and everything seems so clear, then nothing goes as planned for a couple decades until somehow you find yourself going through life with someone whose very presence brings you love, peace, and joy. Buying a home is similar, too. Here's an exciting new adventure and investment, and then you discover what the wiring is really like, or that the beautiful finish was just the finish and underneath is a problem, or all the other so-called-joys of homeownership. But then, somehow, at some point, the house does become home and offers warmth, hospitality, security, and many good memories.

The *Wandering Wisemen* that were shared on our Church's Facebook this December is relatable. These memes showed little plastic magi and camel figures in comic situations as they encountered various household objects as they worked their way to the manger. They set out, but the journey isn't exactly what they intended.

We are also in the midst of this kind of scenario with the pandemic. When this started we had a vision of locking down and getting vaccines and immunity quickly so we could vanquish this plague. Like the magi, we have stumbled around through deserts and listened to various experts – some of whom knew what they were talking about, and some didn't, and some were likely paid by the Herods of our day with their own ulterior motives. As we have worked through these past nine months, some moments have been comic, some have been hard, some have brought unexpected blessings, and some have been downright tragic, like the magi's decision to tell Herod about the child. And, just like when the magi arrived in Jerusalem and thought they had arrived, many have seen the vaccine development as the end of the journey. Except that there is a little farther to go. But the star is again in sight. We know what we have to do to get to the end of this pandemic – wear masks and minimize indoor gatherings until we all get a vaccine. Then give thanks and homage to God in a profound way when this is over.

Many of us may also be on our own journeys that feel like the magi's wandering. All the issues of pandemic life have likely blown a thick covering of clouds over whatever stars we thought we were following. Yet in the midst of the current confusion we may be feeling, we can rest assured that any stars we saw at their rising will be shown to us again when we need them. If God gave us a sign to take a step out in faith, we will also be shown what we need to bring the journey to its fulfillment at the appointed time. We may wander in the meantime, but even if we get turned around or lost a little bit, God will get us safely to our destination. That is the good news of the magi story. If God prompts us and we follow, he will see the journey through. We can count on it.

We can also expect that, like the magi's gifts were put to important uses in a wider story, our own journeys are part of something much bigger than us. Our feeble struggles forward are important steps in God's providential plan for so many. We may never know why, but our wanderings, even when tragedy befalls us on the way, have a meaning beyond what we can imagine. God blesses us and others when we, like the magi, look for his star and start walking toward it.