

A Sermon for  
Epiphany Sunday  
January 2, 2010  
Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6  
Matthew 2:1-12

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“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has arisen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” Isaiah 60:1-6

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed is star at its rising, and we have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea...Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.’ When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”

Matthew 2:1-12

Here we stand at another beginning of a new year. The time when we start over the counting through the twelve months established as our calendar. The New Year is always what sociologists call a liminal moment. That is, a boundary moment, a divider between one significant time and another. When you cross through a liminal moment or boundary, things are

going to be different, changed on the other side. Like the wisdom teacher who said you cannot step into the same river twice, I guess you can't step into the same year twice, because, although the calendar keeps recycling, life and events and experiences keep evolving and moving on. In the midst of the ordinary passing of years there are times of opportunity, times of particular potential for transformation, for change. New Year's could be described as one of those times.

The ancient Greeks understood these two experiences of time and so they had two different words for time. One to describe the on-going cycle of hours, days, weeks, the word *chronos*, which entered the English language in words like *chronometer* and *chronology*. The other word for time, *kairos*, is the word for those particularly auspicious moments, times of opportunity and potential and special importance. While we count down to Christmas and New Year's using *chronos* time, what we celebrate, and anticipate, in this time is *kairos*. It is the biblical "fullness" of time, when the crises of the world created a conjunction of need, of expectation, and opportunity for God to act. So the events of Jesus' birth as described in Luke and Matthew are *kairos* events, God acting at a time of the world's particular need or potential for transformation and change.

When we hear Matthew's story about magi following a star, keep in mind this is *kairos* time. When things that are new and unheard of and out of the ordinary are likely to happen. And there is hardly anything ordinary happening in this story. First, the appearance of a star, brighter than anything else in the night sky, that gets the attention of some Zoroastrian astrologers from what is now Iraq and Iran. A star that, for some reason, they perceive to be a sign of the birth of a new king of the Jews. A star that captures their imagination and they begin to follow as it moves before them. These magi are on a mission, a pilgrimage, to find this new monarch, and pay him homage. These words are repeated over and over again in the story, they want to find him so that they may "pay him homage." That is, to kneel and prostrate themselves before him, worship him, give complete allegiance to him. Which, to me, seems an extraordinary goal for these eastern astrologers. But this is *kairos* time we're in, when the opportunity for change and transformation is strongest.

After many days pilgrimage, these magi arrive in Jerusalem, the city where the reigning king of the Jews is in residence, King Herod. Where else would you ordinarily expect an heir to the throne to be, but in the king's palace? They gain an audience with Herod and announce their quest, "We are here to find the newborn king of the Jews, for we have been following his star from its rising in the east." I wonder if their first clue that there was a problem was the non-plussed look on Herod's face. He was not aware of any new heirs to the throne. The story tells us he was frightened. One thing in the story that was not out of the ordinary is that it was not good to frighten or anger King Herod, for his first reaction would certainly be ruthless. But he called together all of his scribes and scholars and asked them for an answer about where any expected new Messiah, anointed one, would be born. The consensus from scripture was that it would be Bethlehem, the home village of King David, a little no count village about 9 miles from the city of Jerusalem. Feigning sincere interest, Herod calls in the magi once more, and instructs them to go to Bethlehem, find the child, and bring back word to him, so that he can "pay him homage" also. Not likely. So, the magi head out on the road once more. And the star, we are told, moves ahead of them and stops over Bethlehem, over the house where the child rests. Not any ordinary experience by any stretch. Coming into the house, they find the baby and

his mother Mary, and the first thing they do is to kneel at the feet of the baby and pay him homage. Gentile astrologers from Persia offering worship and fealty to this newborn king of the Jews, extraordinary. As Isaiah predicted, the whole world and its wealth is coming to him. After paying him homage, the magi open up their packs and bring out treasures as gifts for the king -- gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Having completed their journey, the magi prepared to head home. But in one more extraordinary happenstance, they are instructed in a dream not to return to Herod. So they returned home a different way, a new way. They went home different. They went home new. Those who study ancient literature describe a category or genre of literature called the hero's journey. There are certain common characteristics to these stories. The protagonists leave their home country on a difficult quest, face challenges along the way, on reaching their goal they receive gifts, boons to take back with them, and experience changes, transformation, in themselves and their lives, they return home changed. And so the magi are drawn from their homeland on a long and perilous journey, successfully reach their goal, and are changed by their encounter, returning home different than they were before.

Some have speculated on the magi's story beyond their leaving the Christ child. The American poet, T.S. Eliot wrote a poem called "The Journey of the Magi." In the final stanza, one of the magi, after coming back home, looks back on the experience: "All this was a long time ago, I remember; And I would do it again, but set down this, set down this: were we led all that way for Birth or Death? There was birth, certainly, we have evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death, but had thought they were different; this Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death. We returned to our old places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease there, in the old dispensation, with alien people clutching their gods, I should be glad for another death." Their journey was about a birth, but their encounter with Christ changed them, like there was a birth of a new life in them and the death of the old. Back home, they now felt at odds, out of synch, with what had been their old life.

That seems to be what happens when Christ is encountered, paid homage, worshiped, you are changed, the old you dies, a new you is born. Your relationships, the world around you, seems different, now seen through the light of Christ that is now in you. Your expectations, your responsibilities, your choices change. Every year we journey to the Christmas encounter, the life-changing moment, then, on returning home at the New Year, once again we find ourselves faced with living as one of the Christ-encountered. Living different, somewhat at odds with our world. Will this be the year we embrace our oddness? Or will we try to hide it once more? Happy New Year. Amen