

Sermon January 5, 2025

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,
no longer bringing up the rear.
From you will come the leader
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”

Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

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! They had arrived at the right time!

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

Arise! Shine!

Arise! Shine! Your light has come! After weeks of waiting in the darkness, the light has surrounded us and God is revealed. God is right here with us. This is what we've been waiting for. The light shines in... and around you, and within you. Let it come forth.

Today, we shift from shepherds and angels to travelers and stars. We are told that a group of wise ones from foreign lands have traveled 1000 miles, following a distant star, hoping to catch a glimpse of a new and powerful king.

This unreasonable trip couldn't have a reasonable beginning. What could have possibly started them on their way? Matthew implies that the trip began with an unexplainable longing. Something unaccountable led them to follow a light without knowing where it would take them. The Gospel tells us little about these wise ones. They are described as "magi" or "astrologers."

The word *magi* is the root from which we get our word magician. Something magical or mystical is happening here. Matthew wants us to see something beyond what we already know. Every one of us has a longing for God deep within us. We don't always recognize this desire for what it is, but we feel it. Our spirits hunger for meaning, our souls for hope, and our hearts for love.

That's one of the things that bring us back to this place each week. There are other places where you can build community and see friends and family, but here... in the church... we also have the ever present hope that we will

feel God's presence. We come in response to a longing even if we can't name it. We have been called forth like the magi, led by the light of a star. We have felt the pull of God's love.

The longing is so deep and the voice so distant that even in those moments when we think we might have felt something or heard something we don't often take even a single step forward. It's less frightening to stay where we are than it is to move toward a light that we're not absolutely certain we saw. For every three far-seeing, truly wise persons, there are a hundred who won't see beyond their noses... or their cell phones. Most of us are too practical to chase stars.

When the magi ask about the new king, Herod fears for his own position in society. He doesn't want a new king to push him out, so he tries to trick the magi into coming back to tell him the child's location so that he can pay the child a visit, too.

Herod knows that anyone worthy of worship is threatening.

The Herods of the world respond to pain and violence with their own violence in return. Others turn their backs, pretending that the pain is not there, hoping that if we ignore it will simply disappear. But hiding in the darkness is no cure. Moments of glory and epiphany, the ability to experience light in chaotic places and hope in the wake of tragedy, happen when we open our eyes and see the now visible God in our midst.

The baby Jesus grew into a man who told us all we need to know to understand God's presence in the world. Jesus taught a revolutionary ethic of unconditional love, stubborn forgiveness and radical hospitality to those who were marginalized in his society. Jesus got into a lot of trouble for teaching and living out his dream of what God's kingdom looks like. And Jesus invites us to live into that Kingdom each and every day. We don't have to wait for a big dramatic event to see God revealed. We meet God in our everyday interactions.

God is revealed in the times when we need it most. Isaiah lived through a time of national trauma and tells the people that he is seeing something emerging. We face our own national and international trauma... from Gaza to Ukraine, from New Orleans to Las Vegas ... those moments when all we can do is look at our tv screens in horror. Some of us face personal traumas, which leave us breathless.

But, in the light around us we can see the connectivity of divine activity and human openness and courage.

The wise men followed the light even though it seemed foolish. They wanted to see Jesus more than they wanted to keep their treasures, more than they wanted to play it safe, and more than they feared the difficulties of the journey.

The Christian faith is not a set of beliefs; it is a willingness to travel, to pursue God's gentle light. Christianity is not a place to stand, but a direction in which to move. Today, God invites us to follow the star.

Arise! Shine! Your light has come!

Consistory Members

Leaving: Elwin, Belva, Leslie, Amy

Marge Bailey

Shana Clark

Moriah Marr

Hannah Matthews

Doug Myers

Sue Myers

Deb Persinger

Sandy Sanders

SACRAMENT OF COMMUNION

Invitation

One: May God be with you

All: And also with you.

One: Lift your hearts.

All: We lift them up to God.

One: Let us give thanks to the God we love.

All: We freely give God thanks and praise

Great Prayer of Thanksgiving

God of today, tomorrow, and yesterday,

As we begin this new year, we once again find ourselves looking for you.

We long for the clarity of a star in the sky, or a voice in the clouds
declaring your presence in our lives.

So today we ask that you would make yourself known to us.

Do what only you can do. Reach into our spirits to give us a boost of
confidence that love is real and we are not alone. Remind us that we are
beloved in your eyes.

We know we're asking a lot for a group that brings very little. We don't
have gold or Frankincense or Myrrh. We haven't thrown off our shoes to
honor your holy ground. We haven't been baptized in the Jordan river. We
haven't spent the last several days traveling here by camel. We're no Magi,
Moses, or Messiah, but we're yours.

Instead, we bring ourselves to this Table—to your Table—in hopes of
catching a glimpse of you. Speak to us in this bread. Speak to us in the
cup. Speak to us through these star words. Speak to us as you spoke
through the clouds at Jesus's baptism, so that these star words may be a
tool that helps us look for you in the coming year.

Holy God, you call us beloved. You are with us in our joy. You are with us
in our sorrow. Surely, even as we pray, you are with us here as well. So

with grateful hearts, we unite our voices in prayer, using the words your son taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father...

The Story...