

Epiphany 2025 Matthew 2:1-12

A few days ago our administrative assistant Jen and I got distracted looking at photos from the trip some of us took to the Holy Land five years ago this week. She asked the question that nearly everyone asks at some point: *Are they sure this is the place where Jesus did...* whatever that place claims he did there. And the answer in most cases is, probably not. There were no eye witnesses still alive when Christians started building shrines to commemorate the significant events of Jesus' life. So, I can't say for certain that the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem really was built over the exact spot where Jesus was born, but, unlike many other churches, it did survive many territorial wars in that region. Legend has it that seventh century Persian invaders spared the church when they saw a depiction of the magi in traditional Persian dress like what they were wearing themselves. It was a sign to them that the incarnation was universal.

But Matthew's gospel only gives us half of the nativity scene—the magi and the star. The angels and shepherds come from Luke's account. John gives us an extended metaphor and Mark gives us a fully grown Jesus, so they're no help. Luke's announcement to the shepherds emphasizes that Jesus' birth was to poor people with no power or status—that God chose to work outside of humanity's expected social order. Matthew begins his story with a genealogy and the magi, showing us that although Jesus was a Jewish descendant of David and Abraham, he was just as much the savior of the Gentile world. If only Matthew's magi had met Luke's shepherds, they might have avoided the audience with King Herod that proved deadly to the children of Bethlehem.

We'll sing the song in a minute because it's Epiphany and tradition, but Matthew does not call them kings; he doesn't say there are three of them, only that they bring three different gifts; and he doesn't specify where they're from other than generally from the East. But that does tell us that they were not from Israel and they practiced a different religion which included something like astrology. The wise men interpret the rising of a star as a sign that a new king has been born, and they follow it so they can go honor him; but then they seem to veer off course. Although the star eventually leads them precisely to the very house where Jesus is, it either it took them on a detour or they stopped following it for awhile and went their own way. The star gets them to the correct region—Bethlehem is basically a suburb of Jerusalem—but instead of going to Bethlehem where Jesus is the magi head to Jerusalem, the seat of political power and the home of King Herod. This makes sense: if you're looking for a new king, you'd expect him to be

the son of the sitting king, and you'd expect to find the king in the palace. But neither the magi nor King Herod understood that Jesus' kingdom is, as Jesus himself will one day attest, not of this world.

Today's lectionary spares us the tragic aftermath of the magi failing to report Jesus' whereabouts to King Herod: the paranoid Herod orders the murder of all the children in and around Bethlehem who were under the age of two, forcing Mary and Joseph to escape with Jesus to Egypt to live as refugees until Herod dies and they can return to Nazareth. Herod's cruelty and violence are emblematic of the worst facets of human nature: he was self-centered, fearful, and merciless in his efforts to retain power, wealth, and control, even when the scholars of two different religions saw this birth as evidence of the good new thing that God was doing. If ever we wondered why God stepped into our human experience, Herod's response shows just how much humanity needs God's intervention.

But I'm still stuck on the magi, who followed this star from far away, a star that could pinpoint Jesus' location as accurately as modern GPS. After it had taken them who knows how far, they had to have looked at the star and said to themselves, *I know it looks like it's pointing that way, but it can't be leading us to some little village in the hills when the king's palace is right over there. Surely if we want to find what we're looking for, we have to go where we'll find power, status, influence, wealth, and the person who is in charge. The star has to be wrong if it's pointing to that sleepy little town.* The magi had to have decided to ignore the celestial sign that had gotten them that far and revert to what they expected, either oblivious to—or in outright defiance of what God was trying to show them. They are not the only ones.

Although we don't know how long after the birth of Jesus it took the magi to arrive, I appreciate that we celebrate Epiphany at right about the beginning of the year, when our gaze is naturally trained on the future. We don't know what this new year will reveal to us, personally or communally, if our resolutions will stick, if our fears will materialize, if our dreams will be dashed or come true. But we do know that God has given us a sign to follow—the life of Jesus who served with love, acted with mercy, worked for justice, and brought hope for peace and healing to all this suffering world; if the way we're going doesn't look like that, it's not the way God wants us to go. Now that we've passed the solstice, the days are starting to get brighter, yet the metaphorical darkness can get pretty deep; may God help us keep our eye on the light of Christ.