

*“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 his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’”* And so begins the telling of the Epiphany story – part two of the larger Christmas narrative that guides us along with the shepherds out of our lonely hills following the angelic chorus of a baby being born, and now beckons us by starlight along with strangers from an eastern land bearing gifts for a child that are anything but age appropriate. And today we hear their story.

Tradition has it that these magi were travelers from the East, from Persia, in the part of the world that now makes up parts of Iran and Iraq. Think about that for a minute. To the people of Israel then, these travelers were exotic strangers from the East. By all rights, to the Jewish mind, they would know nothing of the true God. Yet it was these pagans, not the Rabbis, not the religious scholars, not the leaders of Israel who revealed what God was doing with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem. If they showed up today, they would be, for us in the United States, from the heart of enemy territory with a message of salvation from God.

Their story is pretty inspiring. They may well have been kings and scholars, but what they found at the end of their journey was, as commentator Shelley Copeland writes, “an economically limited toddler, in modest surroundings, lying in a teen mother’s arms. To the intellectually perceptive, this scene was not a scholar’s formula for future success. Yet, by grace, the magi had the faith to experience unbridled joy. They beheld the substance of things hoped for and humbled themselves to worship the gift of God.”

They followed a star, but perhaps the star wasn’t an extraordinary event that astronomers cannot explain, but perhaps it was an ordinary star seen through the extraordinary eyes of the magi, who had the true eyes to see Isaiah’s prophecy being fulfilled: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” And indeed, by the magi’s participation, Isaiah’s truth continued because the magi were “overwhelmed with joy. . . . and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

As much as the magi were scholars of ancient religious texts and studiers of the stars, their trip to Bethlehem following a spark in their hearts kindled by a star in the sky was not simply an intellectual quest or research trip. Though they were different and perceived as outsiders by the ruling establishment, they saw what ordinary residents and kings alike in Jerusalem could not see: God's glory revealed in the birth of a baby in a backwoods town to an unwed, Palestinian teenage mother and carpenter adoptive father.

And perhaps because they were different and perceived as outsiders, they remained outside the fear that gripped King Herod and all of those in positions of power in Jerusalem, and so could accomplish the end of their journey – worship and adoration of Jesus – independent of Herod's deceptive intentions. For the magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and they left for their own country by another road." God shows up in nighttime darkness as well as nighttime starlight, even in unconscious dreams and conscious thoughts.

Could it be that in the magi's story, we are given an Epiphany challenge to see with new eyes the light that led the magi to the True Light of the world what nothing would put out? Could it be that in Epiphany, we are simply called to reveal to the world what we have seen, and to go forward in our life's journey still following the star, even when that means we no longer take the old, familiar road, but unfold a new map and discover an alternate path?

T.S. Eliot imagined the thoughts of the magi back home: "we returned to our places...but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." Jesus does not make our lives more comfortable; Jesus doesn't help us fit in and succeed in a world not committed to Jesus. We notice false gods all over the place. We detect royal pretenders, but we have a story to tell. Nothing is the same; nothing comes easy.

A strange, unfamiliar road is now our path – but we are not alone on our journey, and this road is going somewhere and we are walking in the light that will never be put out. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Today, we remember together and celebrate the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples and friends. This meal is a physical reminder for us to taste and see that the Lord is good, and that God's love for us and for this world never ends.

On this Epiphany Sunday, when the story of foreigners who embarked on a journey by starlight discovered the Light of the World becomes our map for an unfamiliar path, we give thanks for God's love made real in the birth of a baby who lived among us full of grace and truth. We join with the angels, the shepherds, and the sages from foreign lands proclaiming God's endless love such that heaven and earth are full of God's glory and blessed is the one who was born so that we might have life and on earth peace to all people.

And so, remembering the depth of Christ's love, the witness of Christ's life, and the redemption in Christ's death and resurrection, we gather at this table to proclaim the **mystery of our faith: that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.** And as we come, let us remember that this table is not the table of this congregation, nor the table of our denominations. This is the Table of the Lord, and all are welcome here. And because all are welcome, there are no dietary barriers to partaking in the feast: in addition to the bread there are gluten-free wafers and egg-free crackers, as well as water in addition to non-alcoholic grape juice in the cups. Please eat the bread as you receive it, and wait to drink the cup until all are served.

All things are ready – let us join together in our **COMMUNION PRAYER.**

*Say before bread:* "The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "**This bread is a symbol of my body that is broken for you. Every time you eat this bread, do so in remembrance of me.**"

*Say before cup:* "In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "**This cup is a symbol of the new covenant of forgiveness and acceptance established in my blood. Every time you drink this cup, do so in remembrance of me.**"

*Take and drink.*

Let us say together our **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING.**

*"We Are Travelers on a Journey" Bulletin Insert*

Benediction:

Now go out into the world knowing that God goes before you, walks beside you, stands behind you, and is at work within you, empowering you to make a difference in the world.

**BLESSING AND COMMISSIONING (Out of the Shadows of Fear)**

Out of the shadows of fear, and into the light we come.

God gives us hope for the journey.

God brings us peace today.