



Sunday Sermon
January 4, 2026
The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes

Feast of the Epiphany

Isaiah 60: 1-6
Ps. 72: 1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2: 1-12

Come Holy Spirit: Touch our minds and think with them, touch our lips and speak with them and touch our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. AMEN.

Their parents and grandparents had been exiled in waves; few returned when their captivity ended with Babylon's demise. Most who returned knew Jerusalem only as story and distant hope. What they returned to felt hollow and dark. Isaiah speaks God's word of hope in a time of disappointment:

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.

Isaiah 60:5

The Letter to the Ephesians, from which we read today, is also written from a place of darkness. From his prison cell, Paul writes to a fractured community of Jewish and Gentile converts fighting over things that really don't matter. Like Isaiah, he offers hope and bids the flock to remember it's unity in "the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." This is Paul's lode star, unity through the gospel, and it has propelled him on his relentless, peripatetic ministry. He may be writing from a Roman jail, but his letters are tracing over a life on the move.

Movement charged with seeking, exploring, wondering is the throughline of our Epiphany stories. And so, "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." Somehow, these eastern sages have discerned that they are to seek "the child who has been born king of the Jews." That and following a star are all they seem to have to go on. And so they are on the move!

Twenty centuries later, we too are in motion even as we remain physically in one place. Even still, we are seeking, exploring, and search for something that will assuage our anxieties and brighten our night, help us to feel okay, and offer us some sense of meaning, purpose, and hope in a life that can seem empty. The darkness and exiles of our lives can sometimes seem just too hard. A friend is managing mental illness. Another struggles with cancer. A sister fights addiction. A neighbor can't pay the bills. We all wonder how we will bear up when the next crisis

hits. We are tired. What is this all about? Where is hope? Where is God? Where is that star to follow and is there a savior at the end of our journey?

Of the visitors to Bethlehem, tradition assumes that there were three because there were three gifts. And reading today's psalm in light of this story, tradition also reckons them to be Kings from the east. But Matthew only says that they were wise.

What if these ancient travelers weren't Kings, or particularly special? What if they were pretty much like you and me? What if they are like us, seekers trying to find our way and not all too sure what it is we are seeking?

And yet, Matthew calls these travelers wise. Looking back at what they did, it makes some sense. After all, they made it from afar and found Jesus in Bethlehem - no simple accomplishment. However, if we look at the details of the story, their wisdom seems less in evidence. They are lost and asking for directions. And they seem to think that it is a good idea to go to the reigning King of the Jews, Herod, and ask for help to find and show homage to a possible rival to his throne. Surely even a foreigner would know that Herod was in cahoots with the Romans and not to be trusted. No, I suspect that these travelers were neither Kings, nor particularly wiser than us. They too are lost, not immune for missteps, maybe even a bit gullible.

And that is what makes their story so much more wonderful and a spiritual lesson for us who can be just as lost and just as prone to missteps as we seek our way. Indeed, I would suggest that these travelers offer us four essential trail makers for the seekers' way.

Take a risk and follow a star: To follow a star is nothing short of the seeming impossible. Too often, we seek the safe and prudent. But the way of the explorer, the seeker requires risk and vulnerability. The old roads will not get us there. We let go of what we assume and open to possibility, to God. Words found in a prayer often used by Archbishop Desmond Tutu captures this connection between God and the wanderer,

Disturb us, Lord, to dare boldly; to venture on wider seas where storms show your mastery, not ours; where in losing sight of land we shall find the stars. (1)

To dare boldly is not the same as to be reckless. Rather it is to trust that God is out there and in our midst, and when we seek to follow even through darkness, God will bring us, even to our Bethlehem. After all, the darker the night the easier it is to see stars.

Choose your King carefully: We know that the travelers did not see that Herod was up to no good. Power and privilege are addictive. The kings of this world want more and more, and they fear loss and so they preserve, conserve and protect - at all costs. As the psalmist reminds us, the true King will "defend the cause of the poor of the people [and] give deliverance to the needy. This is a journey and a choice between two kings, two kingdoms: "one who ruled by killing and the other who triumphed by dying." (2) This Jesus, now only an infant, will be the one who will teach, "to defend those who have no helper." (3) ...full stop.

Search to Give: Our ancient seekers of the King are not like the first colonizers to come from their east to this continent to acquire and take. These eastern visitors went to Bethlehem not to get but to give. Times have not changed the landscape. It is filled with flashing signs of a culture of having and getting. Would that the Coast Reporter were filled with opportunities to give to the vulnerable, the hurting, the lonely rather sales fliers to acquire and get. And all too often we

think of our relationship with God as transactional as well. We wonder what God will do for us if only we do...fill in the blank. We can become cynical when we pray for something and it doesn't occur. God let me down! These travelers of old teach us that it doesn't have to be that way.

Even before they left, these seekers saw their journey as a chance to give, not to receive. They brought gifts. I suspect they have invested everything. They incarnated Jesus' words that it is more blessed to give than to receive even before they passed our Lord's human lips. When they arrive at Bethlehem, their gifts represent a kind of gospel in miniature: gold for Christ as King, frankincense worthy of divinity, Emmanuel - God with us, myrrh for burial, for a King, a God, and a suffering redeemer. (4) Yet even more, they give homage to Jesus. The Greek word used in this passage, *proskyneo*, suggests prostration at the feet of the king...a physical giving of one's whole self. As we pray in one our Eucharistic prayers, "we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies." I suppose those seekers were wise after all. They understood that a love so perfect as found in God enfleshed in Jesus required nothing but a completely devoted and a dedicated life. May we do likewise.

Go home another way: Finally, we are told that these wise ones go home by another way. The star seems to be gone. They have found Christ. They know that their destiny is not with the Kings of the world but with the King found in the Word made flesh. They have given gifts but now they have so much more to give. Their home is no longer the place from which they came. It is ahead of them not behind them.

And so beloved, it is so with us. This season of Epiphany, as the name implies, is a time when Christ is to become manifest to us. In these days, we come to know more and more who Christ is and who we are to be as his disciples. Like following a star, we must take risks. We cannot be deterred from our mission of grace and goodness by those who would tempt us to rise up on the backs of others. We must be different. As we travel, we will lift up those who are brought low by the principalities and powers. On the way of Jesus, we seek to live out our baptism as Jesus was baptized, to follow him and fish for people as did Andrew and Peter, and to live transfigured lives by giving ourselves completely so that we can live abundantly. And in the end, we find our way home by another way. And mystically that home is as transfigured by our journey and by the star we follow and the steps we take. As T.S. Elliott, said of this homecoming,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (5)

Seek.... Explore....Follow the star.

(1) The Rev. Addison Drake, 1945.

(2) R. Alan Culpepper, *Feasting on the Word*, I, A, p. 217.

(3) *Book of Common Prayer*, The Episcopal Church, p. 518.

(4) R. Alan Culpepper, *Feasting on the Word*, I, A, p. 215.