

Sermon: On the Road

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12**

Rise and shine, says Isaiah, or maybe it was your mother on the first day of school after Christmas vacation. It's always with some reluctance that we drag ourselves out of bed in the dead of winter and, having done it often enough, we can say that it feels like a grace-filled moment when we succeed. We all find our own way to rise and shine, to resist the darkness and start again.

To the church, Epiphany celebrates the first revelation of Jesus to the gentiles, namely, to some magi – we know them as astrologers, wise men, advisers to kings. Epiphany as a revelation does not include shepherds, at least not in Matthew. These magi followed a star and found a child, and that changed everything.

When we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth side by side, we notice a few things. First, there really is only one birth narrative, and it comes from Luke. Matthew gives us a genealogy; a dream sequence for Joseph; and prophecy fulfillment. In the first two chapters of Matthew's Gospel, we count five fulfilled prophecies, and chapter three begins with one more.

Matthew blends the past with the future for the sake of his own faith community. His Gospel includes Jewish elements such as arguments about Scripture, an emphasis on the Law, and the nature of religious practices, and what we now call Christian elements: baptism, prayer, discipleship, Jesus' last meal, and Jesus as Messiah.

Matthew and Luke each tell the story in their own way: Luke used shepherds to emphasize that Jesus was born king of the Jews where Matthew uses magi to do it.

About those magi. We have to take Scripture as it comes to us, yet, being human, we can't resist filling in the blanks. Matthew does not provide a head count; all he tells us is that 'magi from the East came to Jerusalem.' Presumably, they brought servants, guards, cooks, and camel drivers with them, but Matthew does not tell us exactly how

many magi came to Jerusalem. We infer from the number of gifts that it must be three, but it could have been four, fourteen, or forty magi – it doesn't matter.

In the late seventh century or so, an English Benedictine monk called the Venerable Bede felt compelled to name the magi and give them certain characteristics because an event this important needed details. So that's where we get *Melchior*, an old man with a white beard; *Gaspar*, young and beardless; and *Balthasar*, black-skinned with a heavy beard.

Bede also interpreted the gifts: *gold* was fit for a king; *frankincense*, for divinity; and *myrrh* foreshadowed the death and burial of the Son of Man. The first two echo the last verse in today's passage from Isaiah, and Matthew added the third to help tie the story together.

If these invented details were unimportant to Matthew, then we have to look elsewhere for the point of the story, because there must be one or he wouldn't have included it in his Gospel.

Consider this: Herod was a king in name only. His place in Rome's empire was entirely at Caesar's discretion. He took any threat to his position seriously, and when these magi from the East came to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king of the Jews, you can bet he got a little nervous.

The magi observed the star at its rising, which makes sense since observing the heavens and interpreting signs was their job, but it completely escaped Herod's notice. A king is supposed to know what's going on in his realm. Notice, too, that the chief priests and scribes had Micah's prophecy right there, ready to quote, *when asked*. Herod was clueless in all this, and rightly so.

That's one thing Matthew wanted us to take from the story.

Another is, these magi are gentiles looking for a Jewish king, and they have spared no expense to look for him. And when they found him, they were overwhelmed with joy. They saw the child with Mary, and they knelt before him and *worshipped him*, which is what Matthew really wrote.

You don't do that for just anybody. On their way home, they bypassed Herod because they knew he was of no consequence to them.

In the fifth century, Pope Leo the Great wrote in an Epiphany sermon that the magi's determination 'to follow the lead of this heavenly light' showed their willingness to be 'led by the splendor of grace to the knowledge of truth.' The magi, he wrote, 'fulfil their desire, and come to the child, the Lord Jesus Christ, the same star going before them. They adore the Word in flesh, the Wisdom in infancy, the Power in weakness, the Lord of majesty in the reality of man: and by their gifts make open acknowledgment of what they believe in their hearts, that they may show forth the mystery of their faith and understanding.'¹

What would prompt the magi to make such a journey in the first place if it wasn't for some kind of restlessness of spirit? They were trained to observe the heavens and interpret the signs revealed to them there. Something about this sign, this rising star, got them on their feet, and on the road to find out.

St. Augustine wrote that 'Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee, O Lord.'² In today's passage from Matthew, the baby Jesus serves as a beacon to those who are restless for their true home. As restless seekers, we are all on our own path to the manger though some people drop out along the way.

But what if we were like the magi in this story? Those guys didn't stop until they completed the journey, and they went home filled with joy.

This story of the magi gives us an opening to reflect on how and when and *where* we have encountered God's light in our lives. The fact that we start by looking in a manger ought to tell us something. The adult Jesus even said, 'Search, and you shall find; knock, and the door will be opened for you' (Matthew 7:7).

Isaiah reminds us that, though we have all had our ups and downs, God is continually doing new things. Transformation is happening now, as it did for Israel during the Exile, as it happened to the magi, and as it has happened through all of time. Isaiah said, 'lift up your eyes and look around.'

We come to the Lord's Table on a regular basis, and all are welcome. There is a place available for all who want one. Sharing a meal is a good reminder that we have all traveled our own path to get here and that it is here where we encounter Jesus.

Amen.

¹ St. Leo the Great, *Sermon 31: On the Feast of the Epiphany, I.*, trans. by Charles Lett Feltoe. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Vol. 12*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/360331.htm>, accessed 5 January 2019.

² Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F.J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 3.