

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
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SERMON

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Another Way Home

Laura Bentley

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Introduction

They started their journey in the dining room. Inch by inch over the course of a month, they made the arduous trek around candles, over the ceramic town's bridge, past Santa's reindeer, around the wifi router, along the mantle, beneath the TV—they caught all of *Stranger Things* season 5—and finally, they arrived alongside the angel and shepherds, sheep and donkey and cow, to honor the newborn king, resting in a manger.

I am no nativity purist. Luke's Gospel intertwines with Matthews for our household's little wooden peg nativity. But our three magi and their camels do travel each year throughout the season of Advent and 12 days of Christmas, across our downstairs, before arriving at their destination.

This morning, we will join the magi of Scripture on their journey—one that is far less straightforward than dining room to living room to baby Jesus.

Before we hear the story of Epiphany once again, will you please pray with me?

Prayer for Illumination

God of light and wisdom,
By your Spirit, guide us as you guided the magi long ago:
from curiosity to courage,
from searching to worship,
from familiar roads to transformed paths.
Speak to us through your Word,
that encountering Christ might change us too,
and lead us in the way of life.
Amen.

Scripture

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Magi from the East

Matthew shrouds this story in mystery.

Magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem, seeking to honor a new king.

There is no detailing from where these strangers come. There is no certainty of who they are or even how many. Were there three, one bearing each gift? It's unlikely. A long journey to pay homage to a newborn king would probably involve something more like a caravan— the wise men, wise women, animals, perhaps children, servants.

And what is a magi? I use the Greek because we just don't have a great word for them in English. Probably priestly astrologers. Perhaps from within the Zoroastrian religion that was widespread in the Persian Empire. Perhaps influenced by Jewish prophecy and philosophy that was shared during the Babylonia exile.

They echo types from the Hebrew Bible: Pharaoh's advisors and magicians; Joseph as an interpreter of dreams and trusted advisor to Pharaoh; Daniel as a dream interpreter and advisor to Nebecchenezer in Babylon. They are scholars and ambassadors, bridging the divides of religion, culture, and empire.

There are many rabbit trails of speculation that we could go down, but Matthew does not seem eager to fill in the gaps. Matthew tells this story not to satisfy our curiosity, but to show us who is first to recognize Christ—and who is not.

It is enough that a few things are known: These are Gentile outsiders, who see a sign among the stars of a king born in Judah, and follow it to the most logical place: Jerusalem.

The Time of Herod

This story begins with the bad news first: This was the time of King Herod.

CS Lewis imagined what a time like this feels like.

“It is winter in Narnia,” said Mr. Tumnus, “and has been for ever so long.... always winter, but never Christmas.”

Herod the Great, so-called for his large building projects and even larger ego, was the client king of Judea, the “King of the Jews.” His power came from the Roman Emperor. And his rule was tenuous at best.

Many Jews did not view him as a legitimate Jewish ruler. Though Herod was religiously Jewish, he was culturally Greek, politically Roman, ethnically Persian. He climbed and clawed his way to the appointment of king, and he was determined to maintain power.

He was prone to paranoia, and had by this time, killed three sons and his wife, fearing a coup. He brutally protected his power.

Herod ruled by favors and fear. Herod was ruled by favors and fear. And when Herod was afraid, all of Jerusalem was put on edge with him. It was always winter but never Christmas in the time of Herod.

This is the world Jesus is born into. Not a quiet, sentimental world—but one ruled by fear.

The magi arrived in Jerusalem seeking the child born King of the Jews, but to the magi's surprise, there is no child in the palace to receive their lavish gifts.

Herod consults his own wise men—scribes, priests, scholars—and they tell him that the Messiah, the heir to David's throne, is to be born in Bethlehem. Fewer than 6 miles south. And he sends the magi out, perceiving them to now be under his authority, to go find the child and send him word when they do.

Herod's advisors, scholars of Hebrew Scripture, priests appointed as part of his court, they remain in Jerusalem. They have pinpointed the time and location of the long-awaited Messiah's birth...but they stay beside Herod.

Whether it is a lack of belief, an abundance of fear, or simply a habit of pushing aside curiosity for the sake of practicality, the wise men of Judea walk no path at all.

But the magi go.

They take the detour to Bethlehem and land on Mary's doorstep.

Curiosity and Wonder

On the night of Christmas Eve, after the final candle was blown out and the final greeting of Merry Christmas exchanged in the narthex, I walked back through the breezeway to my office. A few folks were still around, but I chatted quietly with a small group. We marveled at how beautiful it was year after year to pass the candle's light, to sing silent night, to await and worship the Christ child together. And one of you said, "People come ready, expecting something wondrous on Christmas Eve."

Even when the year hasn't gone as planned, even when grief hangs heavy, even when tired and weary, even when unsure of what is to come, even stressed and over budget, even when filled almost to the brim with gratitude, feeling like life has been pretty darn good, and there's not much you'd want to change...Christmas Eve is wondrous. Awaiting and worshipping the Christ child together is wondrous.

Whether we are longing for light or simply curious to learn its source, when we arrive in Bethlehem, it is a joy.

I have marveled at the reaction of the magi.

They walk from the grand palace of Herod the Great to the humble home of the toddler Christ. They are greeted by a young mother. I'm sure juggling the tasks of the household

with the child under foot. They searched for a king, and found a poor, Palestinian Jewish family in the small city of Bethlehem. And they were overjoyed. They knelt before peasants. They opened their treasure chests, wholly inappropriate gifts for an ordinary child, but fit for God's chosen king.

I don't know if they fully understood, the way that Mary or Joseph or Anna or Zachariah or Elizabeth did. I don't know if they saw this humble place and recognized a kingdom not of this world. If they saw this small, vulnerable child, and recognized love enfleshed. If they saw a family soon to be on the run from a tyrant king, and recognized the promise of everlasting peace, of all things being made new.

What we know is this: They were overjoyed.

And once they knelt in the presence of Christ, they could not go back to Herod.

Once they knelt in the presence of Christ, they could not go home the same.

On Christmas Eve, we light candles, emanating from the Christ candle. We pass the light that we receive from Christ one to another. And in the darkness, each one of your faces lights up.

Like Moses upon his return from meeting God at Sinai, his face radiated light.

The face of every person—from our wee-est members to our elders, whether here every week or for the first time, whether from down the street or across the country, whether able to recite the creeds by heart or unsure if God is really there at all—the face of every person radiant from Christ’s light.

We expect wonder, and we find it...not in a lavish palace, not upon the seat of power, not within the inner circle of religious elites...but by taking the journey to Bethlehem and kneeling before the Christ child.

Curiosity is what keeps faith from hardening into fear. Wonder is what keeps hope alive. It is the spiritual practice of courageous openness.

Another Way Home

The magi return home, but by another road. Warned in a dream, they ignore Herod’s command to return to him. Fearful as ever and enraged, Herod orders the slaughter of all Jewish boys under the age of two in Bethlehem. But the Holy Family is well on their way, fleeing to Egypt for political asylum until Herod’s death.

It was the time of Herod. It was always winter, but never Christmas.

Until Christ came.

God took on flesh and blood and, as the Message puts it, “moved into the neighborhood.” God moved into Herod’s world, to Pilate’s world, to Caesar’s world, to the world where

fear, power, and violence reign—Love moved in. Love was patient and humble and kind. Love was not boastful, did not insist on its own way.

And Love spoke truth. Love extended grace. Love healed. Love preserved. Love overcame sin and death. Love made a way to life...even in times of Herod, even in the darkest winter nights. Love shares his light. It is wondrous.

The magi were changed by the presence of Christ, God's love come to them. They did not leave by the same path; they were not the same people. And Herod's fearmongering held no power over them.

God's love has come to you. God's light has shone upon you. Christ has come amid whatever Herods hold power over you, over us.

Be it the political forces that threaten the wellbeing of our neighbors, or the violent rhetoric and, too often acts, that threaten our common life together; be it the internal secrets and shame that we carry, or the oppression of our inner critics; be it world changing events or life altering news. We live in a time still of Herods, when there is still winter...but it is always Christmas.

The light, the wonder of Christ, God's love born into this world, is here. Shining on you and me. We just need to be curious enough, hopeful enough to follow.

In this Epiphany season, how will you cultivate curiosity and wonder?

And in this Epiphany season, how will you reflect the light that shines so brightly on you? How will we?

In the words of Howard Thurman,
When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.
Amen.



WESTMINSTER

2040 Washington Road

Pittsburgh, PA 15241

412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org