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January 1, 2017

"Another Way"

Isiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12 Ephesians 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 2:1-12

This morning we read the story of mysterious foreign dignitaries that come to the end of their search for a child born to be King. Will you please stand for the reading of the word of the Lord from the gospel of Matthew 2:1-12.

Let us pray. Lord, we are humbled by the example of these who took the time to travel far to worship one who was born to be King of a nation other than theirs. Help us to understand the significance of this story for their lives and for ours. Amen.

Welcome on this first day and the first Sunday of a New Year. If one of your New Year's resolutions for this year is to be in worship every week, good for you. You're starting off on the right foot. I wonder if we could revive the perfect attendance pins like I grew up earning. I heard someone say that "A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one year and out the other."

One poor guy I heard about tried praying about his resolutions. He got down beside his bed one night, closed his eyes and offered this earnest prayer: "Lord, in 2017, my prayer for the New Year is a fat bank account and a thin body. Please don't mix these up like you did last year!"

What we need, of course, is not another resolution, but a revolution. We need a turning point in our lives. We need to catch a glimpse of a guiding light, and we need to follow that light to a New Life in Christ

This morning is the first day of this New Year, but it is also the seventh day of Christmas. You know, the "swans a swimming" day. January 6th, which is the 12th day OF Christmas, is Epiphany. Epiphany closes the Christmas season because it's the day we celebrate the arrival of the seekers from the east who searched for and found Jesus and worshipped him bearing gifts.

On Christmas Eve I told you that in the Netherlands the day that children get presents from Sinter Klaus is on his birthday December 6th. January 6th is the day when children get presents in Mexico and in Central and South America. That's when they celebrate what they call the Three Kings Day.

Brian Stoffregen writes about these travelers,

"Lots of legends have grown up around this story of the three kings, one of which is that they were kings. Matthew doesn't call them kings. He calls them "magi," which some translators have rendered "wise men" or "astrologers." The truth is, in the days of Jesus, these folks were thought of as glorified fortune-tellers. Our English words "magic" and "magician" come from this word "magi."

Last Night Anne and I attended the Ben Jackson Magic show at the Baytown Little Theater. I made sure our seats were not near the front. I didn't want either of us to be sawn in half. As it turns out, no saws were in sight.

The other assumption is that there were three visitors. The gospel account does not say there were three of them or five or ten or thirty. The idea of three kings came when the three gifts. (But that assumes that none of them went together for a group gift.)

To the Jewish mind, those hearing Matthew tell them this part of the story of Jesus these were not so much respectable "wise men" or "kings" but horoscope followers, a practice condemned by Jewish tradition. Some have compared them to folks who make their living by foretelling the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards, and the like. One writer describes them this way: "The magi would thus represent, to the early Jewish reader, the epitome of Gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus - dabblers in chicken gizzards, forever trotting off here or there in search of some key to the future." [1].

No one really knows from what country or countries these travelers came. Some commentators say they were from Arabia or Mesopotamia. Some say they were from Persia (or modern day Iran). Others say they were from Babylon (or modern day Iraq). Some say they were from even further away, as far away as India.

Wherever they came from they had to be independently wealthy to take the time to go on such a search. If they were kings they would have to have been from three different countries. (one king per country or like for us, one president at time) The wisdom or knowledge that they were privy to was that which they gleaned from spending time studying something the average person who had to work to put food on the table had no time to study. They studied the stars.

Are you are beginning to get the idea? The magi of our story were not "wise men." They were not models of religious piety. They were pseudo-scientists, astrologers, fortune-tellers, horoscope fanatics, and even heretics. The magi should not be there, but they were.

What about that star? Astronomers, theologians, and historians for hundreds of years have been trying to determine exactly which star might have inspired the biblical writing. There are two general theories. Some believe the star was made especially for to announce Jesus' birth to those that were looking for a sign in the heavens. Others speculate that there was a very special juxtaposition of heavenly bodies to produce a spectacular unique brilliance, never seen before or since. In 1604, German astronomer, Johannes Kepler, proposed that the star was a conjunction of Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn in 7 BC - possibly.

Whichever it was it got the attention of people who would not be likely candidates to become models of faith. God uses something within their own unique frame of reference - planetary alignment - to make them take notice.

It is not an accident that Matthew, who was Jewish and was writing primarily to a Jewish audience, includes this part of the story that the other gospels leave out. Matthew wants to make the point that even though Jesus was born as the son of David in the city of David, he came for far more than just the Jewish branch of God's family tree. Jesus came not only for the poorest Jewish citizens like shepherds, but for the richest Gentile sojourners. He came for people of every race. Just as God reached out to a nation of people who valued genealogies by having Jesus born to a woman and man of the house of David in the city of David, God reached out to people who valued the study of the stars through a star.

When they arrived at the house where Jesus was, the magi entered, bowed in reverence, and presented presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Each gift foreshadowed one aspect of Jesus' ministry. The gold was fit for a king. The frankincense alluded to the priestly role he would fulfill as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. The myrrh symbolized the anointing him for his burial.

Some people inch their way to Jesus, starting in early childhood. Others undergo a dramatic experience later in life, so that all of who they are is transformed. Many people come to Jesus in ways that don't match our expectations. Whoever these magi were, they show us that we can never predict how God will bring us to Jesus.

The Magi represent the first Gentile worshipers of Jesus, and they represent the future Gentiles that would come to accept the Kingship of Jesus. They are the reason we celebrate Epiphany. The Magi are us. I am not Jewish. I'm Scotch/Irish and French. But because of Jesus, we non-Jews can be grafted into God's family tree. We, too, can bow before him in adoration and praise. We too, no matter what the circumstances of our heritage, are among those who have searched and found or been found by Christ.

Epiphany is not only the name of this date on the liturgical calendar; it means literally an appearance of God. After they presented their gifts to Mary and Joseph the foreign dignitaries, like Joseph, also had a dream. Like Joseph, who had been instructed by God in a dream to take Mary as his wife, these magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and tell him where they found the one born to be King. Instead of returning to Herod and triumphantly celebrating their location of the child, their dream tells them to return to their home "by another way."

"Another way" is another way of saying "out of the way." To skirt Herod's sphere of influence would have required a daunting detour. But, firmly trusting in "God's warning to them through their dreams the magi do not hesitate to take a different path, to strike out into unknown territory—and now without even their guiding star for directions.

After they left Joseph was also warned in a dream to take Jesus and Mary and flee to Egypt. Settled in his ancestral hometown, with a new wife and child, Joseph is suddenly directed to get out of the country to Africa.

If we were to read on in the rest of chapter 2 we would read why they were warned. When the magi didn't return to Herod, he, judging from the information he had gleaned from the magi's initial visit, sent troops to Bethlehem to murder all of the baby boys 2 years old and younger. This suggests that the Magi didn't arrive in Jerusalem until 2 years after they initially saw the star in the east. It also explains how Joseph Mary and Jesus could have made the arduous journey to Africa with Jesus being weaned and able to walk. Now we know another reason why the magi gifts were of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold, frankincense, and myrrh are extremely valuable and easily packable.

The magi and Joseph dropped all their plans to adapt to a new reality . . . and they went "another way." Are you willing to go another way? If we only ever go where we want to go, then who is in charge of our lives? Can you point me to one instance in 2016 when you went in a direction you did not plan to go or wish to go? When you live facing the future with confidence and hope, when you live in the "stream of the Spirit," that stream will sometimes flow in directions we do not expect, in directions we don't want to go.

Yesterday on the Moth Radio Hour I heard a story of Danusia Trevino, a Russian Immigrant who became a U.S. Citizen who was summoned for jury duty when she was 30. She was a bitter, pessimist who had a harsh view of the world and the people in it. When she told some of her friends she had been summoned for jury duty they told her how horrible jury duty was and gave her advice as to how to get out of it. She happened to be a singer of a Punk Rock band in New York City. So she spiked her hair and wore her rattiest jeans and a t-shirt that said "I want to be your dog." The old conservative judge knew what she was trying to do and wouldn't let her off the hook. Eventually she was picked as juror number 1. She said the other 11 jurors were her complete opposites. When it came time to render a verdict she was the one who voted guilty. The other 11 voted not guilty. The other jurors encouraged one person to talk with her and better explain the constitutional right of being innocent until proven guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt. Because of the compassionate witness of her complete opposites she was moved and in the end she changed her vote to Not Guilty.

When she went to respond to her summons to serve jury duty it was the last thing she wanted to do. When the trial was over the last thing she wanted to do was to leave her fellow jurors. She went to jury duty one way, but left another way.

In 1990, my cousin Mark and I drove to Wichita Falls for the funeral of our grandmother Bessie Mae Kidd. Mark was born in Wichita Falls so he drove because he the way from Houston well. We came home the same day. Back then the speed limit was 55. Coming home I asked Mark if he'd like me to drive and he said, "O.K." After a while he began to nap. After a few hours I woke him up. I said, I have some good news and I have some bad news. The good news is we've been making good time. The bad news is I just saw a sign that said Shreveport. I made a wrong turn in Dallas. I was going home another way.

This Tuesday, Mark and I will be making another trip to Wichita Falls for the funeral of our older cousin. I'm driving this time, but I will not let Mark take a nap.

This morning we've come searching like the shepherds and the magi. I don't know what you've come seeking this morning. I don't know what it is that might be troubling your heart. But know this, God is in this place and God will meet you where you are. So as you come this morning to the Table, let that short walk be the next leg on your journey of faith. Like the magi lay your gifts, your lives, your offerings before Jesus. Leave what is troubling you behind. Leave the hurt and the pain caused by others. Leave the guilt of your sin. Leave all of that behind and as you leave the table.

As the magi left the Holy family they headed home by another road. As you leave this place of sanctuary from the world to return to the world, may you go home another way. May the road you take seem different because your vision of your world has been changed by being here and beginning this year here. May you listen for God's directions, whether through your dreams or through your prayers or through your peers or even through wrong turns and be willing to go forward even if it involves going... another way.

Let us Pray, Dear Lord, we thank you that through the gift of Jesus you have given us a glimpse into your plan of salvations for people of every nation, He shows us how you bring hope of justice to those in need and deliverance to captives. In him we see the promise of new life if we follow his guidance for our lives. Let your all-encompassing presence be with those who, for whatever reasons are in need of your loving care. Help them sense your healing power at work to ease their pain, shield them from the demonic power of this world that seek to undermine their spirits and protect them from any aggravation that might weaken them further.

We particularly pray for those in institutions who seem to be forgotten, those disturbed in mind and spirit. Bring wholeness to them and a sense of your companionship in the midst of their loneliness. Let us not cast aside any who dwell among us, whether they be the simple, the slow, or the impaired. Rather, help us to see in them a special gleam of the light of Christ.

We pray for those on our hearts this morning, for those we know who are ill and struggling. May they and we all know the peace that passes understanding, and may it guide and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.

1. **Brian Stoffregen, "Gospel Notes for this Sunday," via Ecunet, #14225, 12/30/07**