

## Scripture

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory— this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him.”

3-4 When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

5-6 They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly:

It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land,  
no longer bringing up the rear.  
From you will come the leader  
who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.”

7-8 Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

9-10 Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

11 They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh.

12 In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

### **Isaiah 60:1-6**

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

2 For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

3 Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around;

they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.  
5 Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,[a]  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14**

1 Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to a king's son.  
2 May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice.  
3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness.  
4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the needy,  
and crush the oppressor.  
  
5 May he live while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.  
6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth.  
7 In his days may righteousness flourish  
and peace abound, until the moon is no more.  
  
10 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles  
render him tribute,  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts.  
11 May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations give him service.  
  
12 For he delivers the needy when they call,  
the poor and those who have no helper.  
13 He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.  
14 From oppression and violence he redeems their life;  
and precious is their blood in his sight.

### Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer.

This is Epiphany Sunday, which represents the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. What I mean by this is that thus far the Baby Jesus was only known to the Jews, and only a small number of those. Mary and Joseph knew, of course, as did a smattering of rough and disreputable herdsmen.

Simeon had met the child, as did Anna, and Anna told all who would listen that the Christ-child had finally arrived, but it seemed that few listened to the old woman. Jesus' birth was much like most other births; a big deal for the immediate family, but largely unnoticed by the rest of the world. Just one more baby; common and unremarkable.

This changed with the arrival of a caravan bearing riches from the east. In a backwater town like Bethlehem the Magi would have appeared as exotic superstars; travelers from faraway Persia who studied star charts and discerned fates in the night sky. They were heirs to a mystical form of soothsaying handed down from the ancient Sumerians that predated even Moses, and they had come to see Jesus, the shameful little baby born out of wedlock to a mother who made grandiose claims about being impregnated by God. Their arrival would have caused quite a stir, and the gifts they brought would have been equally glamorous.

These were the first non-Jews to take notice of Jesus – the first clue that Jesus would be important not only to his own family and tribe, but important to all the nations.

When we think of the word epiphany we think of an 'aha' moment, when the light bulb clicks on and a great idea floods into our heads. It is a new understanding – a revelation. The Greek roots of the word mean to show to, or to shine on, and this is why we use the word epiphany specifically for the wise men who were shown Jesus after following a shining star.

This whole episode would seem to be good news – after all, what could be wrong with foreigners coming to worship the Son of God? Isn't this exactly what was written about in Isaiah?

Nations will come to your light,  
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,  
to you the riches of the nations will come.  
6 Herds of camels will cover your land,  
young camels of Midian and Ephah.  
And all from Sheba will come,  
bearing gold and incense  
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

These foreign emissaries seem to be the fulfillment of prophesy, yet it turns out that almost everything is wrong with this story.

Although we celebrate Epiphany two weeks after Christmas, the actual event took place about a year and a half after Jesus was born. After a year and a half, Jesus' people still did not know him. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. They were asleep at the switch. Even though Jesus' presentation at the temple caused a stir with Anna running around announcing the presence of the anointed one, still the people were ignorant.

Not only the common people, but the priests and scribes – the ones whose job it was to know these things – they were completely in the dark. So when the travelers showed up looking for the new king, they must have been mystified that nobody seemed to have a clue as to what they were talking about. No one had heard of the king of the Jews, all they had was Herod, who was a tetrarch appointed by Rome, a foreign ruler over the land of Judea.

Surely darkness covered the earth, and thick darkness is over the peoples.

Last year at this time I preached about the three wrong men – these Magi of the Epiphany. They were the wrong men because they were foreigners – they weren't of God's people. They were the wrong men because they practiced sorcery and augury – reading omens and signs in the heavens, which was strictly forbidden for faithful Jews. They came at the wrong time – they were a year and a half late. And they ended up in the wrong place. After following the star for most of their journey they turned from the light and proceeded to the palace in Jerusalem instead, because that is where one would expect to find a king. The wrong men, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, and using the wrong method of finding Jesus.

And yet, for all the wrong elements of this story, these were the few who were paying their respects to the Son of God while the rest of the land was in darkness. For all the wrongness of the Magi, God's people were even more wrong.

They were dwelling in darkness and ignorance – we know that for certain. We also know that much of their ignorance was of their own doing. When the Magi inquired about the location of the King, the teachers of the law found Jesus' location in their sacred scriptures.

'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.'

For all the hysteria about the impending Messiah, which had been a big theme among the people from the time of the Maccabees a century and a half earlier, it seems that the nation should have had their eyes on Bethlehem the whole time that they were waiting.

But they didn't look – their ignorance came from a lack of effort. Though the answers were in front of their noses, they didn't actually read the words that they claimed were central to their faith. There is a lesson in here for all of us.

We have a treasure of knowledge in our bible. Yet most of us don't read it. We spend hours on Facebook and watching tv – things that have zero impact on our real lives - but rarely do we crack a bible. We have much in common with those Judeans who were living lives of oppression in darkness.

What made their ignorance worse was that when their ignorance was revealed, they chose instead to remain in their darkness. They passed on to the Magi the location of their Messiah, but we read nothing about them sending a delegation of their own to investigate, or even sending word to the authorities in Bethlehem to look into the matter. They did nothing. They put the scroll back on its shelf and thought no more about it. Their ignorance was willful.

How different than the Magi. Even though the Magi seemed to do everything wrong by the standards of the Jews, what they did do right was to put feet on their faith. They saw the light in the heavens and it prompted them to action. They loaded up their camels with precious cargo and set off for an uncertain destination. They invested their time, their treasure, they risked being robbed or killed in a foreign land.

What they received because of their efforts was a glimpse of the King, but also something more. Let's look at the last line of this passage.

'Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.'

I think there is much more going on here than just a change in travel plans. I think that Matthew is offering us a tantalizing hint between the lines about what life is like for those who have met Christ. There is an allegorical reading that offers us some deeper insights.

The Magi originally had responded to a sign in the heavens. God spoke to them in a way in which they were already conversant – God spoke to them in their language. Once in Jerusalem, God spoke to the Magi through scripture – in the fragment from Micah that the teachers of the law discovered. Finally, after laying eyes on the baby Jesus, God spoke to the Magi directly, in the same manner that God spoke to his own people, through visions and dreams.

The message that God gave them was to not return to Herod, but instead to find another way. If we are to read this allegorically, then we have to ask 'What does Herod represent? Who is Herod in this story?'

Herod is worldly power. Herod is control through the use of force and fear. Herod is ambition that seizes what it wants no matter what the cost – even if it has to kill children to get its own way. Herod represents the political, economic, and personal domination systems of the world.

When God warned the Magi not to return to Herod, God was not simply speaking of that one despot. God was telling them not to return to the familiar ways of the world, because there is a better way.

*Hoδooσ* – in this morning's translation it is rendered as route – 'they returned to their country by another route.' Other translations read 'God warned them in a dream to go home another way.'

More often than not, *ὁδός* is translated as way, which suddenly takes on a different flavour when we look at how else this word is used in the New Testament. We frequently see *ὁδός* as the word used to describe Christians. We are followers of the way. We see this usage several times in Acts, in Peter, in Hebrews.

In fact, Jesus pressed this point exactly when he said to his followers ‘I am the way (*ὁδός*) the truth and the life. With this understanding, the message to the Magi is much more significant. ‘Do not return to the ways of the world, but come home through this different way.’

You see, once you have met Christ, nothing can ever be the same. We don’t take the old road any longer. We unfold a new map and we discover a new path. We are no longer at ease in a world not committed to Jesus; we notice false gods all over the place.

The way is not a belief system or world view, it is, as Pope Francis recently said ‘a journey to be undertaken.’ It’s a way home. This new path is what the Magi found when they met Jesus. This path is what we find in Jesus who is both the destination and the way home – the end and the means.

Amen.