

Matthew 2:1–12 — “Going Home Another Way”

Who still has their Christmas decorations up?

And who has already put them away?

Now, I know some of you *know* there are twelve days of Christmas—
because we sang about it at the Christmas dinner.

But counting actually starts on Christmas Day

Which means, technically...

Christmas isn't over yet.

It stretches on through twelve days
and ends with a day called Epiphany.

On Friday, I was putting away our Christmas decorations,
and Maya looked at me very seriously and said,
“Why are you stealing Christmas?”

Can you tell we've watched *The Grinch* approximately forty-seven times this month?

American Consumerism has already moved onto Valentines day. But the church, in its
wisdom, refuses to rush past Christmas too quickly.

It says: stay here a little longer.

Sit with what has been revealed.

Let the meaning widen.

We spend a lot of time with part of the Christmas story leading up to the birth, and the manger etc. But today, before we officially walk away from Christmas till next year. I want us to look together at this part of the story that is associated with Epiphany.

Epiphany is not just the end of the Christmas season.

It's the moment when the meaning of Christmas **opens outward**.

Up until now, the story has stayed close:

Mary and Joseph.

Shepherds and angels.

People who already knew the promises,
already spoke the language of faith,
already belonged on the inside.

Epiphany is the moment the story breaks its borders.

It's the moment Christ is revealed to the **Gentiles**—(aka people who aren't Jewish)
to foreigners,
to outsiders, people beyond Israel's religious boundaries.

Which means Epiphany isn't just about a star or a journey, it's about who this child is for.

Matthew is making a bold claim:

that the kingship of Jesus does not belong to one nation,
one religion,
one people group,
or one insider story.

Jesus is not crowned king after the Magi arrive.

They don't make him king.

They recognize what is already true.

From the very beginning,
this child belongs to the whole world.

**If God were going to reveal the identity of the Messiah to the wider world,
who would you expect to be the first to recognize him?**

Religious leaders?

Political authorities?

People who already know the scriptures?

That's not who Matthew gives us.

Instead, Matthew introduces us to a group of people we might not expect at all —
travelers from another land,
outsiders to Israel's faith,
people who don't read the Bible,
but read the sky.

And that's where the Magi enter the story.

Despite the Christmas plays and the songs like We Three Kings.

Scripture does not say they were Kings, In fact it doesn't even tell us how many there were. We just assume there are 3 since there are 3 gifts mentioned.

But the Magi were not kings.

They were Astrologers.

Scholars trained to watch the sky,
to notice patterns,
to read meaning in movement and light.

In their world, the heavens told stories.

To “read the sky” was to believe that universe itself carried meaning

When something new appeared —
a strange star,
an unusual alignment —
it meant something had shifted in the fabric of reality.

Now here’s what matters.

these are not people Israel would have pointed to
as reliable guides to God.

They are Practitioners of a wisdom tradition that many religious people distrusted.
People whose way of knowing didn’t fit neatly inside scripture or temple life.

And yet —
they see something others miss.

They look at the night sky —
something they have spent their lives paying attention to —
and they recognize a disruption.

A sign.

A holy interruption. Signifying a new king

And instead of dismissing it,
they follow it.

After all, if a king has been born,
Jerusalem is where you'd expect to find him.

That's where power lives.

That's where palaces are.

That's where authority gathers.

But when they arrive and begin asking questions,
something becomes clear.

The sky is not leading them deeper into Jerusalem.
It's leading them out of it

Toward Bethlehem.

Toward the margins.

Toward a place no one would associate with power.

Before they can leave, though,
they are summoned to the palace.

King Herod wants a word.

And Matthew wants us to notice this contrast.

The Magi see the sign and feel wonder.

Herod hears the news and feels fear.

Fun fact about Herod.

Herod the Great was well-known in the ancient world for both his paranoia and his brutality. He had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor under whom Herod ruled, is rumored to have said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. As the would-be Jewish king, Herod could not eat pork, so his pigs were safer than his progeny!¹

Herod asks the Magi to go find this new born king and then report back to him about where he is. So "he can send him a baby gift".

Matthew doesn't need to explain what's really happening.

We already know.

This is what empire does
when it feels threatened.

PAUSE

The Gospel of Matthew is quietly saying something radical here:

God is not limited to one way of revealing truth.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-11>

God does not only speak through familiar channels.

God does not only use approved language.

God does not only show up where we already expect God to be.

Sometimes God meets people *within the systems they already trust*
and then calls them beyond those systems.

The Magi don't abandon their practice —
they follow it deeper
until it leads them somewhere they never expected to go.

To a child.

To vulnerability.

To a king without an army.

To power that looks nothing like power.

From the very beginning,
this child belongs to the whole world.

And that matters—
because origin stories matter.

Little children love to hear the story of when they were born.

Who was there.

What time it was.

What people felt when they arrived.

Those stories tell us something about who we are
and where we belong.

Origin stories matter not just for people,
but for families, communities, and faiths.

Grace has an origin story. Denominations have an origin story
So does Christianity itself.

In the ancient world, origin stories mattered deeply.

They explained power.

They named loyalty.

They told you whose rule you lived under
and what kind of future you could imagine.

Empires were very intentional about their origin stories.

Rome traced its beginnings to gods and heroes.

Their story said: power is destiny.

Conquest is natural.

Hierarchy is inevitable.

The people of Israel told a very different kind of origin story.

Not one rooted in strength, but in vulnerability.

In wandering ancestors.

In barren women and enslaved people.

In exile and return.

Their story insisted that meaning does not come from power,
but from promise —

and from a God who hears the cries of the lowly.

So when Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth,
he is not just giving us details.
He is making a claim about what kind of world this is
and what kind of God is at work in it.

Which raises a question for us.

What if God is still doing that?

What if God is still revealing truth
outside our familiar religious categories?

Not truth that contradicts love, but truth that expands it?

What if faith doesn't begin with certainty, but with attention?

There's a certain kind of person who trusts data.

Not feelings. Not anecdotes.

Numbers. Patterns. Evidence.

Think researchers. Epidemiologists. Sociologists. Economists.

People trained to believe that if you look carefully enough, the truth will reveal itself.

For years, people working in public health kept noticing something strange.

The numbers didn't line up with the story we liked to tell about ourselves.

Infant mortality rates.

Maternal death rates.

Life expectancy.

Chronic illness.

Incarceration.

School discipline.

Across city after city. State after state.

The same pattern appeared.

Black and Brown bodies carried more risk.

More harm.

Shorter lives.

At first, the dominant explanation was familiar.

Individual choices.

Personal responsibility.

Culture.

Bad luck.

But the data wouldn't cooperate.

When researchers controlled for income.

When they controlled for education.

When they controlled for access to care.

The disparity didn't disappear.

The star stayed in the sky.

Eventually, some of them said the quiet part out loud:

"If the outcomes are different even when everything else is equal,

then the problem isn't individual failure.

The problem is the system."

They didn't call it sin.

They didn't call it empire.

They didn't quote scripture.

They just followed the evidence.

And the evidence led them somewhere uncomfortable.

Toward the long shadow of racism.

Toward redlining.

Toward segregated hospitals and schools.

Toward environmental toxicity.

Toward chronic stress caused by discrimination.

The data revealed something our national story had tried very hard not to see:

that racism is not just a matter of prejudice.

It is a structure.

A system.

A way power organizes life and death.

For many of these researchers, that discovery changed the way they traveled.

Some lost funding.

Some were accused of being "political."

Some were told to stick to the numbers and stop asking moral questions.

*But once they saw it,
they couldn't unsee it.*

*The star didn't give them all the answers.
But it made one thing clear:
the old map was lying.*

That's a Magi story

The Magi didn't know exactly what they were looking for.
They just knew something had shifted.
Something new was being born.
They trusted the signs they were given and they followed them.
And they were willing to follow the light—
even when it led them beyond what they already understood.

After the Magi encounter the child—
after they kneel,
after they offer their gifts—
they are warned in a dream.

*And when the Magi finally see the child,
they realize what the data alone could not tell them:
this truth is not just descriptive.
It is relational.*

That's why they don't go back to Herod.

They go home another way.

That's not just a travel note.

It's a confession.

To encounter Christ

is to have your sense of direction rearranged.

The light does not just illuminate a destination.

It transforms the path.

They were asked to return to Herod—

to cooperate with power as usual—

but instead, they choose another way.

Going home another way

is about allegiance.

About conscience.

About refusing to let old maps keep telling you where safety lives.

Modern Magi look like people

who pay attention long enough

to notice something is wrong—

and still believe something better is possible.

Scientists who follow the data

even when it challenges power.

Teachers who see what systems are doing to children

and speak anyway.

Artists who tell the truth
when silence would be safer.

The light does not explain everything.
But it tells us this:

God is not always where we assumed.
Power is not what we were taught.
And the road we thought would take us home
may not be the road that leads to life.

And that, strangely enough,
is very good news.

Because it means that even now—
in a world shaped by fear and force and empire—
another way is possible.

And once you see it,
you can never quite unsee it.

So may we be people
who pay attention to the light we are given,
who are brave enough to follow it,
and humble enough to go home
by another way.

Amen.