

A Star in the East

Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Rachel Knuth

The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ

1st Sunday after Christmas – January 1, 2017

Good morning on this Sunday when we celebrate Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi in the Nativity story. This is the first Sunday in the season of Epiphany, that light-filled time between Christmas and Lent. Epiphany begins with the Magi following a wild star, moves through the stories of Jesus' baptism, the miracle of water turned to wine—it's the season when we tell the most magical and inexplicable stories, and we end with the Transfiguration—the most mysterious of all! Epiphany is a season when we are to mull over the mysteries of the Christian faith, while looking for more ways that we might be light to one another.

This is going to be a retreat-style sermon, where we will journey through the story of the Magi together, asking questions that are meant to be savored. You might like to doodle in the margins of your bulletin or write down some of the questions. We will walk through the story, stopping to explore: the Magi, Herod, and Bethlehem. At each stop there will be background information, followed by questions for you to consider, questions that I hope will allow you to collect wisdom or starlight for your journey with God in the coming year.

So this morning I invite us to be led by the star that blazes inside us, and to travel with the Magi, to seek Christ anew. I wonder what you'll want to pack for this trip? Is your traveling bag already heavy, loaded down with burdens from 2016? Are there things that get in the way of your earnest search for relationship with Christ? What can you let go of, and what do you want to preserve as you move forward in your spiritual journey in 2017?

I. The Magi

As we sling our backpacks over our shoulders, let's visualize the Magi. What do you see in your mind's eye? They could have been women, they could have been a large contingency, and they could have arrived nearly two years after the birth. You can get creative here-- Matthew's account is the only biblical mention of the Magi in the birth narrative, and he does not say that there are *three* Wise Ones, nor does he call them *kings*. Lutheran Minister Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, "We Three Kings of Orient Are...Not in the Bible!" She says, "Three kings from the Orient bringing gifts to Jesus in a manger is a charming story, but it's not actually the one we find in the Bible. A closer reading of Matthew shows that we have no idea how many people were there, and we don't know

how far east they came from. Was it the Orient? Was it New Jersey?... And most importantly, they were definitely not kings." Rev. Bolz-Weber continues: "They were Magi, as in magicians, and not the cute kind you hire for your kid's birthday party. Yet history made them out to be kings, maybe because the reality that they were magicians is too distasteful, since no one really wants the weird fortune-teller lady from the circus with her scarves and crystal balls to be the first to discover the birth of our Lord. So the story has been nicened up into an idealized picture of multicultural diplomacy. But the Epiphany story of Herod and his infanticide reveals a God who has entered our world as it actually exists, and not as the world we often wish it would be." And here's the first question of our Sunday morning retreat: How do we dress up our selves for God, wishing Jesus could come to the nicened up version of ourselves? Do we hide our pain beneath a saccharine façade, the way the Magi have been possibly sweetened up for the Nativity? Are we brave enough to show up in life, in church, as we actually exist?

We may not have too much detail about the Magi, but we do know a few things from historical context that might be useful. We know that the people of Judea would have been familiar with the process of embassy — of sending a delegation to the king, usually to argue a cause. How will we commit to act as an embassy, as a delegation to the seats of power, in order to support the most vulnerable among us? Matthew does not degrade the Magi as sorcerers but portrays them as earnest seekers of Christ. How can we be earnest seekers of Christ? How can we look up at the myriad stars in the sky and visualize a sincere hope for our world?

II. Herod

Okay, cinch up your pack now, we are headed for Herod! It may seem unlikely to find wisdom from Herod, but perhaps we have something to learn from the shadow side that Herod represents; the star led the Magi to Herod, and so we go there too. As poet Mary Oliver writes, "Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this too, was a gift." When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, they ask, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod is horrified—he is the king of the Jews, he is the king of everyone in Judea, his name is on their money and everything. And now these Wise Dignitaries from the East are asking about a rival king.

Indeed, Herod is threatened, rightfully so, because Jesus will subvert the entire paradigm of what it means to be a king. He's not going to be a King Herod who rules by force and peddles influence to the Roman occupiers. Jesus is going to be the kind of king who frightens the authorities because of his solidarity with the poor. Jesus will be an anti-Herod. Jesus is not going to build fortresses, he is going to build relationships across cultural boundary lines, he is going to heal people and stand with the vulnerable. Which brings us to search for another piece of wisdom: Do we build fortresses around

ourselves, the way Herod built fortresses out of fear? Are we guarding our hearts unnecessarily? In our context of the United States, on the first day of 2017, I wonder, what structures do we need to tear down, for the sake of the kingdom that Christ comes to establish? What needs to be cracked open for more light to shine through? Herod is a symbol of injustice, and Jesus is lifted up as the antidote to Herod, as one who will offer a strong corrective to oppression and violence. As followers of Jesus, how will we work to further the cause of justice in our country this year?

III. Bethlehem

After their time with Herod, the Magi travel on to Bethlehem, and now so do we. The word "Bethlehem" means "House of Bread." The Magi find the baby in a house—not the stable, as they have arrived quite some time after the birth. They travel to the House of Bread to find the Bread of Life, and they bow down in worship. The cosmic and the earthly are held together in one brief moment. Can you imagine the Magi, with their feet on the ground and their heads in the stars? These Wise Ones, these students of the stars and followers of a cosmic way, forge a path to the bodily, physical, incarnation, to Emmanuel (God-with-Us).

The Magi celebrate the birth of Jesus with joy because Jesus shows us how close God is to us. This morning our sanctuary will become a house of bread: We will tear bread from a loaf and pour wine in a cup; we will share in Communion. This sacramental moment invites us into the mystery that is God—not in a way that separates us from this world, but calls us to become what theologian Leonardo Boff calls "sacramental human beings." We become the house of bread in the world—we leave the Communion table and move out into the world, carrying the mystery of the sacred within us.

I invite you to look down at your hands. Look at the lines on your palms, the wrinkles or scars, hands that might be smooth or leathery from sun and work, fingers that have twisted or skin that has become loose from illness; if we look closely we will see that our hands tell the story of where we've been, like a map of our lives so far. If you're feeling brave, you might silently turn to the person next to you and show them your hands, as you look at theirs. Find a crease to follow on your partner's palms. Put your hand next to your partner's and connect the lines of your palms—can you see that lines cross your hands onto your partner's? Can you see that we are all on a human journey together? Can you imagine that we could put all of our hands together and connect the lines? That Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-Us, joined his hands with ours? When we take the bread in our hands this morning, we are connected with Jesus and with each other — and then we go out into the world to share this sense of oneness with our community.

Matthew tells us the Magi return home by another way. In this new year, we may need to throw away the map and go home by another way too. Whatever unfamiliar terrain we traverse, as human beings, as a church, may we strive to be faithful to the light that guides our steps. And as we move into 2017, may we be earnest seekers like the Magi; may we not build up fortresses like Herod, but tear down the walls of injustice; and may we go out into the world like Bethlehem, a House of Bread. Amen.