

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: Following the Star

Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*6 "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."*

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Today is the first Sunday of the new year. I bless each of you in the name of the Lord for gathering here to praise and worship God at the start of 2025.

(Slide 1) Today is also a special day—the day of Epiphany. Every year, we observe Epiphany on January 6. Just as we proclaim on Easter, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed,” I’d like us to try something similar today. When I say, “Christ was born!” you respond with, “Christ was born indeed!” Let’s try it: “Christ was born!” “Christ was born indeed!”

The word “Epiphany” comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, which means “manifestation,” “appearance,” or “revelation.” Do you have any cultural rituals that you observe around the new year? On December 31, my family stayed quietly

at home, but as the evening darkened, we could hear fireworks marking the last day of 2024 at a nearby park. The bright flashes of fireworks breaking through the darkness and revealing beauty encapsulate the meaning of Epiphany—a light appearing in the darkness.

(Slide 2) In Korea, people also celebrate the new year with fireworks, but there's a unique tradition: welcoming the new year by watching the first sunrise. Korea is a peninsula surrounded by the sea on three sides, and on New Year's Day, many people head to the eastern coast, the farthest point east in the country. Do you know why? Because the sun rises in the east, and people want to be the first to see the new year's sun. They gather at the coast before dawn and wait in the darkness. As the horizon gradually brightens, they welcome the new year, some making resolutions and others silently making wishes. Once again, light appearing in the darkness—this is the essence of Epiphany.

Christ came to us on a silent night while the world was sleeping. He came as the light in a dark world. The fact that Jesus was born in the little, poor, and humble town of Bethlehem doesn't just mean He came to a specific location. It means He came into our lives, into our minds and hearts. Christ heard the faint groans we utter in our pain. He came to be the light in our darkness, the hope in our despair, the salt that gives meaning to our lives amidst corruption and injustice.

During the Christmas season, we often read the story of the Magi, also known as the three kings. They are familiar figures in almost every Christmas program, often regarded as wise men with extraordinary foresight who recognized the birth of Christ. However, from a Jewish perspective, they were outsiders, Gentiles ignorant of the law. It must have been a blow to Jewish pride that Gentiles were the first to recognize the birth of Christ.

The Magi were priests from the East. In ancient times, the heavens were considered sacred, and priests believed they could discern signs of God's plans or meaningful events by observing the stars. One night, as they gazed at the heavens, they saw a particularly bright and unique star. Recognizing it as a sign of the birth of Christ, they followed its light on a journey.

(Slide 3) When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked King Herod and others, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." How do you interpret this part of the story? To me, it holds a significant lesson. Where were the Magi looking for Christ? In Jerusalem. Did the star lead them to Jerusalem? No. From the beginning, the star

guided them to Bethlehem. So why did they go to Jerusalem instead of following the star?

Jerusalem and Bethlehem are only about five miles apart. The Magi must have hesitated as they stood between the two. They likely knew the star was leading them to Bethlehem, but to their eyes, the path to Bethlehem seemed dark and insignificant. Bethlehem was a poor and humble place, while Jerusalem was bright and majestic. The Magi assumed that a king would be born in the grandeur of Jerusalem rather than in humble Bethlehem. They ignored the star and relied on their own assumptions and logic.

Friends, when we choose prejudice and human logic, we lose sight of the star that guides our lives. Like the Magi, we may end up looking for Christ in the wrong places. Don't misunderstand me—I'm not saying that assumptions and logic are inherently bad. But when we let them define everything, we risk losing sight of the guiding light and missing the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

Faith and non-faith differ in one crucial way: faith enables us to breakthrough prejudice, logic, and the darkness of despair. Faith transcends human understanding and empowers us to move forward even in the face of uncertainty.

King Herod, at the center of power, had no need for faith, as he controlled everything. Yet, even he lived in fear and insecurity. He was constantly afraid of losing his throne and struggled with feelings of inadequacy due to his mixed heritage, which made others question his legitimacy as king. These insecurities drove his obsession with power.

When the Magi asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Herod was terrified. He was willing to do anything to protect his throne, even murder. Though shaken, he concealed his fear and asked the chief priests and teachers of the law where the Christ was to be born. They replied, "In Bethlehem."

Throughout Scripture, new beginnings often emerge from the margins—from the humblest and most lowly places. The Bible consistently calls us to see the world through the eyes of the marginalized and to create a world where the overlooked and oppressed are recognized as worthy and precious.

(Slide 4) Although the Magi initially followed their assumptions to Jerusalem, they eventually humbled themselves and followed the star to Bethlehem. There, in a small stable, they found the Christ child lying in a manger. Overwhelmed, they knelt and worshiped Him, offering their gifts. Their humility before the humble

Christ foreshadowed the kind of King He would be—a King of peace and salvation.

After encountering Christ, the Magi were transformed. No longer relying on their own plans, they trusted God completely. When warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they obeyed without hesitation.

Friends, what message does the story of the Magi hold for you? For me, it serves as a reminder not to let prejudice and human logic obscure the guiding light of faith. Faith calls us to discernment and courage, enabling us to break through darkness, despair, and challenges.

Christ has come into this dark world and into our hearts as the eternal guiding star. May we walk by His light in the year ahead. Amen.