

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

Today, we're going to go on a journey. And like I said to the children during our conversation with young disciples, you are invited to bring your whole imagination with you on this journey. We'll take a few stops along the way, a couple little breaks to imagine together, 'cause journeys can be long and tiring, and it's good to keep ourselves alert for where God might be trying to speak to us. In our own particular moment in time, it's the start of a new calendar year, a time when we are bombarded with hopes, expectations, and uncertainties about the months to come. On Christmas Eve, Evans preached about what it means to come home and to make more space for others to be embraced in the love and welcome of Christ. Now, the Epiphany story leads us to the next phase of celebrating Christmas, one that calls us to go out, to reach further, to open our eyes to a story of mystic astrologers who shared little in common with Mary and Joseph's family, yet were led by their observations of the heavens to come and worship the Christ child, and then to change plans suddenly in order to protect him from a vindictive King Herod. Their expectations shifted along the journey, and so may ours.

So our journey begins, as many do, in the comfort and familiarity of home. Pause and imagine. Bring a picture into your mind. What does home look like for you? Maybe it's not a particular building, but a place where you are confident in your surroundings. Your experience and wisdom is valued. You are known and respected in a context where things are predictable. I think about communities I have been part of where I knew my role so well that I didn't have to embrace uncertainty. I could help others to feel more comfortable, but I rarely felt out of place myself. An image I have is when I was a tour guide for the admissions office at my college, happily spouting facts about the school I loved, confident and secure in a bubble of familiarity and expertise. God is present in those places of comfort, and we need those places to recharge and reconnect with ourselves and our values. But inevitably, reluctant as we may be, we are often called away from those places when God has work for us to do. Pause and imagine: the star, a spark that calls us on to something new. What might that picture in your mind be, what could be the thing that nudges you to bravely move away from what you know?

Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us a lot about the home context where our magi begin, but we can imagine they were well-respected scholars, perhaps Zoroastrian priests adept at analyzing the stars and making sense of what they would find there. Still, when they see the sign of the star and begin to follow its path to Jesus...they don't have all the answers. The first step of their journey involves humbly following a hope, not exactly sure where or to whom it will lead. They first go to Jerusalem, a reasonable place to assume a new king might reside, only to learn that the one they are seeking is not there. Still, even though home is a place where could avoid this

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uncertainty, the magi set out in faith, following a star, trusting that the next steps will reveal themselves once they begin to move. I wonder if they knew each other before the journey, or if they met on the road. Did they consult each other's expertise, saying, "Are you sure we have this right? Do your calculations meet my calculations?" Though we don't know exactly how many magi joined together for this journey, I'm comforted by the image of a small community on the road together, checking in, sharing snacks, assuring each other that they might be going in the right direction. Pause and imagine. Who are the people you have met on the road who give you the strength and resilience to keep going, even when the path looks frightening? Can you picture a friend? Or an author? A spiritual companion who has joined you on the road to say "Yep, I see that star too. I think we're going in the right direction." Pause and bring their image into your mind.

When the magi arrive in Jerusalem, they encounter a different kind of community. There in the halls of power, the idea of a new king is threatening. When the magi announce their observance of the star, and the chief priests and scribes verify the prophecies using their own areas of expertise, Herod's comfort zone is unsettled. But not only Herod's...the text says that all of Jerusalem is frightened with him. Not only the ruler, but everyone is afraid about what this change-up in power might mean. So pause and imagine: what do you picture when you think of power and authority in our world? Does it look like a government building? A strong tower of institutional norms? Following all the rules and trusting the powers that be? Are there things that would be frightening to see change if God suddenly showed up in a new way? Where are the places in our world where the radical hope of Christ is going to unsettle some things that make us comfortable? In this story, Herod comes across sounding a little like a conniving Disney villain, but everyone else in Jerusalem is also afraid of this new order of things. Many of us sit comfortably in positions of power, authority, and privilege, and need to contend with how we respond to a challenge of our worldview. A challenge of our bank accounts. A challenge of our assumptions that systems that benefit me benefit everyone. When the star appears, and the magi show up, are we ready for some of the comforts of our status quo to be challenged? Still, the journey continues, and God asks us, will we stubbornly stay put in Jerusalem, or dare to keep moving toward Christ?

When at last the magi arrive to the place where Jesus is, and the star stops overhead, even before entering the house we are told that they are overwhelmed with joy. Pause and imagine. What does it feel like to be overwhelmed with joy? What does it look like? Is there confetti? Fireworks? A replay of New Year's Eve? Or maybe it's something more subtle but felt deep in your soul. The magi have this response before they have even met Jesus. Their joy comes simply from the star stopping at long last. On this journey, they've been putting their faith in this guiding symbol of hope, and I wonder if as they trudged along, some of their faith was starting to wear thin. It was a long road, one with hills and bumps and unpleasant patches. Maybe it felt a little amorphous, like the last two and a half years of pandemic life have for many of us. We watch for signs that the journey is close to an end, only for the star to jump a little further down the road. We're not quite there yet. When the magi see this star stop, joy overwhelms them. Points of arrival feel wonderful. And yet they're often just one more point on the journey, before we set out again. Keep working on those images of joy, cause they're something we have to hold on to when the journey is long.

The magi come in, they offer their gifts, they kneel and pay homage to this infant child just as they might have to a powerful political leader in Jerusalem. But then it is time to continue on. In the 12 verses that tell the

story of the magi coming to visit Jesus, only one verse describes their actual being in Bethlehem at the point of arrival. Before we can catch our breaths, they are off again, continuing the journey.

“Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” They’ve only just arrived. And already the path onward must be different than they had planned. Having met the Christ child, the magi are transformed, and God beckons them into the next stage of their journey even while closing off the path of familiarity that they expected to return by. In this new reality, taking the familiar road home is no longer an option. The magi have become accomplices in God’s radical work in the world, and their path forward must look and feel different as a result.

At this time of year, with December 25th in the rearview mirror, looking to the coming twelve months of unknown, I’m often challenged and comforted by the poem, “The Work of Christmas,” written by theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman. It goes:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among the people¹,
To make music in the heart.

As we go home by another way, into whatever struggles 2022 is sure to bring, may we remember our holy task to do the work of Christmas. The reality of Christ coming into our world doesn’t just pause us for a moment, but it transforms our world and begs us to respond in a new way. We choose to be overnight hosts for the rotating shelter, though it might mean going into work the next day a bit groggy. We choose to be generous to our grumpy neighbor, though comfort would tell us to ignore them. We choose to step outside of familiarity,

¹ Thurman’s original poem uses the language “brothers,” but I have expanded it here to be more gender inclusive, part of the radical welcome of this spirit of Christmas.

and sometimes challenge our own “rational” best interests, because that is the work of Christmas, and the hope we must engage once we have met Christ.

So our last stop on this morning’s journey is here, to imagine what it might look like to keep doing the work of Christmas in the days, weeks, and months to come. Pause and imagine. In 2022, what will it look like to love ourselves and our communities fully? What will it look like to turn away from the comfort of home in pursuit of love? What will it look like to notice when we are clinging to towers of authority, like Herod’s kingship? To choose to sacrifice some of our own power and comfort for the humility Christ calls us to? How can we consult with our companions on the road, trust each other when the path is unclear, and embrace overwhelming joy when we find it on the way? The path of the magi, and the work of Christmas, is not a clear-cut linear kind of thing. It takes grace, humility, and a willingness to adapt as we move. The Christmas journey is one of uncertainty where we don’t know where we will end up, but still faithfully follow the star, trusting that God will be with us wherever the path might lead. Amen.

Amen.