

**Following the Star**  
**January 6, 2019**  
**Rev. Lynne Keel**

Today is Epiphany Sunday, and we will be looking at the traditional scripture read on this day, the story of the wise men from afar who were captivated by a star like no other which would ultimately lead them to Jesus. We've heard the story many times, but it seems to become more distant and unrelatable with the passage of time. For one, we don't look up at the sky much anymore, because it is hard to see anything up there. Several years ago, I downloaded an app on my phone called "Sky Guide." Because of the GPS in our phones, I can point my phone at the sky, and the app will identify what I'm seeing.

Occasionally, I'll see something bright or unusual in the sky, and I'll pull my phone out to see which planet or constellation I'm viewing. Mostly, though, I get frustrated, because the app reveals to me all the stars and features I cannot see with the naked eye. Sometimes, cloudy skies are the problem, but in most cases, light pollution obstructs my view more than anything. The irony is not lost on me that the more human-created light we have around us, the harder it is to behold the heavens and the work of God's hands.

Stargazers are familiar with so-called "dark parks," which are designated viewing areas that have been identified as ideal for star-gazing because of the reduced light pollution. As you might expect, most of the parks in the US are located out west, where the population density is far less than here on the East coast.

Many of you have heard me mention before that one of the unexpected surprises of my first mission trip to Haiti was the incredible star-gazing. As part of our trip to Bayonnais, we climbed to the rooftop of the school for our devotional time. High up in the mountains, far from the light pollution of Port au Prince, I saw more stars than I have ever seen in my life. At that time of year, the Milky Way is visible to the naked eye, and even without my glasses, I could barely take in all the details and shooting stars as they crossed the sky. Indeed, we will be climbing to the rooftop once again in March while our mission team is in Haiti.

While we are currently surrounded by the light of day, I invite your imagination to be drawn to the dark of night, to an ancient sky filled with stars and planets and



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mystery. Look for the brightest star in the sky and listen now for God's word to you today:

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."*

*<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

No doubt, as I was reading this text to you, the visual images that sprang to your minds were probably something like the wise men of Christmas pageants past and present. We sing the hymn "We Three Kings" with a sense of boldness and reverence as they enter the nativity scene with the fanciest of costumes and crowns, carrying sparkling, dazzling gifts fit for the greatest of kings. At the risk of ruining Christmas pageants and the nativity sets we display in our homes each year, I regret to inform you that the Church totally got that wrong. Through the ages, we have constructed and embellished these characters' stories and significance to the point that we even gave them cute names and back stories. Balthasar was often represented as a king of Arabia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India.

None of this is named in scripture, of course; it is simply early church tradition that evolved over time. If we look closely at this morning's text, we will notice the

utter lack of details or descriptions to draw this conclusion. There is no specification of 3 people, nor that they were kings. It is thought that the tradition of three individuals came from the three gifts offered and that the designation of kingship was derived both by their offering of expensive gifts as well as Psalm 72 verse 10, the Psalm we read earlier, where the kings were directed to pay homage and bring gifts to the king of the Jews.

So you might be wondering, if they weren't three kings from the Orient, who were these people? Well, we can start with the original translation of the Greek word "magi" which is often translated as wise men. Because of the origins of the word "magi" as well as the context in which it is used, it is thought that they were priests of the religion Zoroastrianism who were internationally known astrologers/astronomers. They were the well-respected scientists of their time. They spent their lives watching the skies, and without light pollution, there was a lot to see. In the ancient world, they connected what was happening in the skies with what was happening in the world. It was how they understood and explained world events. So it makes perfect sense that they would have seen that star and hit the road like it was their job, because in fact, it was their job.

It is thought that they were wealthy as evidenced by the gifts they had in tow, and it was likely that they would not travel the dangerous roads with that much wealth all by themselves. So imagine if you will a large caravan of foreigners from the east, the Zoroastrian priests with their cooks, field hands, security detail, and abundant livestock to both feed them and carry their loads. They saw this magnificent star and immediately associated it with a new king of the Jews. So where else would they go to confirm the accuracy of this prophesy but to the currently named king of the Jews, King Herod?

King Herod, of course, freaked out and brought in the most qualified Jewish people he knew, the chief priests and scribes who confirmed the prophesy and went further to say that this newborn king of the Jews would come not to rule but to shepherd his people. Do you notice the distinction? Herod was threatened not only by the idea that a new king of the Jews might try to replace him, but that this king would do so by shepherding. Herod knew that he came into power and kept his power through tactics of lies, manipulation, torture, deprivation and general tyranny. This shepherd king, however, would rule with care, compassion, and protectiveness the way a shepherd guides and loves his sheep. This new Messiah was a PR nightmare for Herod, so he schemed quickly.

We know what happens next, but I think it helps to tell the rest of the story framed with the character analysis of each player in the story. In other words, let's just call it what it is: this caravan of foreigners who were outsiders, worshippers of another deity, are the first human beings to name Jesus as the new king of the Jews in the gospel of Matthew. It wasn't the government, it wasn't even the Jewish religious leaders; it was those mysterious, new-age science guys who paid attention to what was happening, who were open-minded to a truth that stood in the face of everything they had seen previously, who allowed themselves to be guided by the brightest of heaven's stars to encounter the most pure definition of Love ever known. And after than long journey, fraught with political manipulation, maneuverings, and strange warning dreams, they freely shared the best of what they had to offer in gold, frankincense and myrrh. They broke with the status quo, and allowed for the possibility that the world had just changed forever.

But what came next was one of the most inspiring moves they made in this journey: they went home by another road. The Ultimate Truth they encountered in Jesus Christ gave them the courage to disobey a murderous tyrant. I believe they felt they had no choice. A few thousand years later as people who rarely look at the stars anymore, what does this story mean for us? As we are blanketed by light pollution, noise pollution, government pollution and corruption of every kind, what sorts of wisdom and truth can we glean from this story?

I think it starts with looking for a guiding star and following it to encounter the greatest Love ever known. We need to constantly be on the lookout for the path to Jesus. In my preparation for this sermon, I came across a beautiful story about a fictional 4<sup>th</sup> wise man written by late 19<sup>th</sup> century author and Presbyterian minister, Henry Van Dyke. The Other Wise Man's name was Artaban, and he was from Persia. Like the other Magi, he saw signs in the heavens proclaiming that a King had been born among the Jews. Like them, he set out to see this newborn ruler, carrying treasures to give as gifts to the child—a sapphire, a ruby, and a "pearl of great price." However, he stopped along the way to help a dying man, which made him late to meet with the caravan of the other three wise men. Because he missed the caravan, and he couldn't cross the desert with only a horse, he was forced to sell one of his treasures in order to buy the camels and supplies necessary for the trip. He then continued his journey but arrived in Bethlehem too late to see the child, whose parents have now fled to Egypt. While there, he saved the life of a child at the price of another of his treasures.

He then traveled to Egypt and to many other countries, searching for Jesus for many years and performing acts of charity along the way. After 33 years, Artaban

was still a pilgrim and a seeker after light. He arrived in Jerusalem just in time for the crucifixion of Jesus. He spent his last treasure, the pearl, to save a young woman from being sold into slavery. He was then struck in the head by a falling roof tile and was about to die, having failed in his quest to find Jesus, but having done so much good through his work along the way. A voice told him "Verily I say unto thee, Inasmuch as thou hast done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me."(Matthew 25:40) He died in a calm radiance of wonder and joy. His treasures were accepted, and the Other Wise Man finally found his King.<sup>1</sup> In truth, he had been encountering Jesus all along the way.

We no longer stare at the heavens like the magi to make heads or tails of what is happening in the world, but we can still look for the mystical stars and find Jesus. In our story, the Jewish chief priests and scribes brought the truth of prophecy from scripture, and the Zoroastrian priests brought the truth of scientific observation to develop their combined understanding of who Jesus was. Today, like the chief priests and scribes, we have benefit of scriptures that reveal God's truth about love and compassion and guides how we should live. But we are often uncomfortable with welcoming outside perspectives, truths that challenge our worldviews, to gain a holistic understanding of who our God is, the king of the Jews who is ultimately the king of all humanity.

So how might we make room for and invite the wisdom of the mystical magi of our time: the outsiders, foreigners, people of other religions, women, people of color, homeless people, scientists, and the whistleblowers? Their prophetic voices combined with our faith tradition have the potential to bring transformation, healing, and another beautiful dimension to the kingdom of God. To be sure, making room for and listening to those who live on the margins, those who live outside the status quo is a risky business. It often means standing up to the power-hungry tyrants of our era at great personal cost. It can mean the loss of power, it can mean the loss of income, and sometimes, it means the loss of life. Theologian Serene Jones said it this way on Twitter, "Civil disobedience lies at the heart of the Epiphany story: the Magi receive an unjust order from a vindictive tyrant. Instead, they defy him. May we do likewise."

Let me be clear. This is not a sermon about breaking the law or unleashing chaos although being a faithful Christian can certainly lead us there. It is about following a star to Jesus. It is about the realization that in the face of evil, we have to take a different path home. We have to. This morning's scripture is not about cute,

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Other\\_Wise\\_Man](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Other_Wise_Man)

glamorous costumes and essential oils for Jesus in a Christmas Pageant. It is a text that proclaims loudly and boldly that Jesus Christ is our king, not Herod. Jesus Christ is our king, not Barack Obama or Donald Trump. Jesus Christ is our king, not Congress, or capitalism or whatever other financial interests over which we wage wars or hoard our resources.

So *if* we follow that star, *if* we come to the realization that Jesus is king, then our only response is that we pay him homage, we offer the very best gifts we can offer, and we take another road home. As followers of Jesus Christ, we can no longer afford to sit passively in our pews week after week, offering our “thoughts and prayers,” and thinking that someone else will solve the world’s problems. The fish of the oceans are choking and suffocating from our trash, children are dying at our nation’s borders, and people are sleeping in our church courtyard while the rain pours down on them and they shiver in the cold. I could list more examples, but we would be here all day. How long will we allow the corruption to continue and people to perish in the name of power and money? Enough is enough.

Like Artaban, on our journey to find Jesus, we are called to give our best gifts, our greatest acts of charity, everything we have to offer. That is what it means to be Christian. Not to be served, but to serve others. I’ll be honest: I’m tired of church members everywhere complaining about how the church doesn’t do enough for them. The church is called to serve the world, not itself. And when we start serving the world, we are going to be at odds with King Herod. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to defy and hold accountable the Herods of the world, the Herods on our own soil. As we approach the Lord’s Table in all humility, let us remember that we can do no less for the one who risked both his humanity and divinity for our sake. Amen.