

*“A New Way Home”*  
*Sermon by Rev. Peter Shidemantle*  
*Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church*  
*Epiphany of the Lord*  
*January 6, 2019*  
*Matthew 2:1-12*

The story of the wise men from the east following a star to Bethlehem to adore the Christ child usually gets bunched in with the birth story from Luke’s gospel, and the first chapter of Matthew. It becomes part of the same story. And so the wise men show up in all our crèche scenes right there along with the shepherds and the angels and the animals, all gathered around the manger with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus. The story of the Wise Men usually serves as a kind of tag-on to the main event. But this is the day of the Epiphany of the Lord, January 6 – and it happens to fall on a Sunday this year – so the story of the Wise Men gets its own hearing.

The word *epiphany* means, literally, “a showing.” In the more liturgical churches, the Feast of the Epiphany is the first feast in the calendar year, an event that the church has seized upon that lights up the first week of our dark, wintry New Year. It celebrates the “showing” of the infant Christ to the Eastern sages in Bethlehem, where they had been led by a star, which, as Luci Shaw variously puts it, is “a small, glowing, celestial flashlight for their dark path from the Orient . . . a remote spark from the universal Light toward whom the wise men were traveling, a coal from the blaze that sprang up when God struck his match in the world.”

In many parts of the world it doesn’t matter what day of the week January 6 happens to fall. It is a festival day, even bigger than Christmas, with rituals of gift giving tied to treasure-bearing wise men instead of a jolly rotund man in a red suit. In some places, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men, who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.

So at the center of Epiphany is a distinct and unique story unto itself, of a star that led the wise men to a place, to the place where Jesus was born. It would have taken them a while to get there. The prophecies of the Messiah’s birth were Jewish prophecies from the Jewish scriptures. The wise men, it is important to note, were gentiles – non-Jews, foreigners – being let in and included in the Jewish promise – which from the beginning (Abraham and Sarah) was meant for all the world, and so the story is Matthew’s way of showing that Jesus the Jew is the Christ, the anointed savior for all peoples and nations. Israel, it seems, didn’t expect it to happen just this way. Three magi from a faraway land isn’t the whole world. But then the entire story is out of whack with their expectations, as would be Jesus’ entire life – just as he’s often out of whack with everyone’s expectations, including our own, when we’re more interested and more impressed with the world’s views of success and power and greatness than we are with his.

It's important to understand the direction of the wise men's movement here. The story of God's inclusion of the whole world in the promises of God to Israel is portrayed through journey – just as it had always been from the beginning when God told Abraham and Sarah to “go” to a place that would be revealed to them – here the movement toward the star, bringing the whole world to the same place of God's birth into human life. The star is not to be confused with the star you “wish upon” to have your own best dreams come true, the star that Jiminy Cricket sings about. It's the star that God places in the heavens of the world's darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. Light is something that every human heart longs for and responds to, and so the star of Bethlehem shines just as bright as it ever has as people turn toward its light and come toward it in faith. But sometimes there is so much darkness around that we begin to lose hope, or maybe we're content to live in a kind of semi-darkness or semi-light, with enough brightness to see our own way but not enough to see God's way. We get fooled into believing that's all the light there is, and sometimes get pretty impressed with the light we can produce ourselves.

Several years ago someone gave me a copy of a column written by an SU student in the university daily paper. It was about human cloning, when that became a hot ethical topic. It was a well-written article, I remember, in which the writer attacked any religious objections to moving ahead with human cloning, saying that the most recent developments in this field proved that the manipulation of nature can yield human life, and that, as he put it, “it might finally remove the naïve shroud of belief that every human owes its life and being to a god.” Our daughter Kara was looking at the article (12 or 13), and noticed that the headline for the column had the word “god” in it, with a small “g.” She said she thought the word “God” was always supposed to have a capital G. I told her that the writer didn't believe in God, I guess. She said (these are one of those things your kid says that you don't forget) - “That's silly, who does he think made us?” Kara was old enough that she knew about the “birds and the bees.” That's not what she meant. She wasn't talking about biological production or re-production – and though this isn't the way she would have put it – she was talking about what makes a human being, a being who looks at the heavens and sees more than points of light and the movement of galaxies, but who looks at the heavens in search of life's truest meaning, who longs and hopes for what cannot be found in just what the world has to offer, who knows that if we are to know the joy of being alive it won't be through amazement with our own achievements, but through the knowledge that we are the fruit of divine love. That's not naïve. It may be childlike, but it's not naïve. I think it's the kind of childlike-ness that Jesus commends as being close to the kingdom of God, about whose eyes are turned in that direction, toward that light, and whose aren't.

It was, after all, “wise men” who followed the star to Bethlehem, not naïve men, not foolish men. And in their wisdom they came to understand, with God's help, that coming to adore the newborn king was dangerous business. The story testifies to the fact that from the very beginning Jesus was a threat to all other kingdoms of this world. Herod's rule was as dark as any. So threatened was he by the power of God's love born in a manger that he would have all male children under 2 years of age killed. The antagonism between God's kingdom, which Jesus would embody, and the kingdoms of the world, has not abated. Even in the very name of

Christ, God's children have been slaughtered, and mothers still wail in grief as violence nearly covers the face of the earth. God's messengers are still a threat, and people still prefer the darkness to the light (as John's gospel attests), and as we know from our present darkness. But the star still shines, still leads, and its light is still the light of the world. And blessed are those who take no offense at him.

Another, final important move in the story of the wise men's journey – and our own as well: the wise men went home *by a different way*. They steered clear of Herod. They didn't return to the evil that, before they had seen the Christ child, they didn't know was evil. They took a different road. That's the trouble with God, you know – God doesn't let you leave as you came. You've got to make for home by an alternate route. How was it for this strange mix of humanity after they left the manger, do you think? Can you imagine how it must have been? I can, because I have seen people who've been touched by the living God – who have followed the star of God's light – and their lives were never the same. They took a different road. They finally knew where they came from and where they were going, and even when the way led them through the valley of the shadow of death, they knew their comforter.

We'll be traveling a different road in the coming year at Pebble Hill – a road that hasn't been traveled for quite some time, so in many ways it will be a new road through unfamiliar territory. Life takes us in different directions – there are twists and turns, some can be anticipated and planned for – others can only be taken or followed in faith. But we do not follow blindly, without planning or preparation, but wisely. As Garrison Keillor says somewhere, "If you get your guidance by following a star, the directions are going to be a little bit vague." So as we keep our eye on the star, on the light of Christ, we need to develop peripheral vision, aware of what is around us, the barriers to overcome, people to serve, the opportunities to embrace. Through faith and trust in God, through commitment to one another and the mission of the church in this place, the way through pastoral transition and the new thing that is even now being prepared will emerge and flourish. Things will not look the same, but the road we have travelled thus far will, I believe, help you to see with clarity and hope, able to see with fresh eyes and renewed hearts.

Our journey into a new year can begin at this place, at this table, on this day also when Christ is born. Take the bread and the cup as the wise ones ate of the good news and drank in the incarnate love of God – as we turn once again toward "the true Light that enlightens everyone."