

People Look East

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Ravensworth Baptist Church
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Matthew 2:1–12

If you look around, you might think it still looks like Christmas in here. That's because it is still Christmas! While we are observing the day of Epiphany today, we're still in the Christmas season—the 12th day!

Thanks to Nancy for the series with the kids during Advent and Christmas and on Epiphany today, our kids have understood the Christmas story in a tactile, participatory way. My kids have come home each Sunday with a deeper feeling that they are part of the story. One stuffed animal that was wrapped up in a towel was even named Jesus, so we're living out the story!

Today is the last Sunday we'll observe a group traveling to see young Jesus within our nativity scene. On Epiphany, which is actually tomorrow, January 6, we mark the day when the wise men traveled from far away following a star in the sky to find Jesus. The season, which follows Epiphany is about growth—we'll celebrate Jesus' baptism and remember our own, we'll spend five weeks with the Sermon on the Mount, and then to Jesus' transfiguration. The season after Epiphany in our church calendar ends on Mardi Gras or Shrove Tuesday, the night before Ash Wednesday. Last year we said we needed to have pancakes and I'm happy to say that we'll have pancakes before our evening Ash Wednesday service this year---more on that so stay tuned!

This day called Epiphany is about following, discovery, curiosity, and it falls at the beginning of our calendar year. I know that many of us look at 2020, a chance for new beginnings, a hoped-for healthier year, a year that might turn the world to love, and we might be feeling a little discouraged five days in. But Epiphany is all about the new beginnings and what happens after an encounter with Jesus.

Our familiar story, which is only found in the gospel of Matthew immediately follows the birth narrative. King Herod was ruling in Jerusalem and Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were still living in Bethlehem, probably with some of Joseph's family.

As Mary and Joseph played with Jesus in Bethlehem as he walked around the house on wobbly toddler legs, wise men from the east walked into the city of Jerusalem. The pilgrims were likely of the Zoroastrian faith, sages from Persia. How interesting that this morning we are reminded of the inherent faith of a people who are living in deep fear today. They were walking all around the city, asking the ones who might know, "where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

In any scenario, you can imagine, one king of an area would not like to hear about a new king being born in his area, especially from those who came from afar. That meant news had spread and he didn't know about it. As Herod heard about the gossip traveling around, he invited the wise men to come him so he could learn about the star rising. As he'd already consulted with the leading scribes, he knew that the prophet Micah said Bethlehem was the spot.

When he learned that Jesus had been born, Herod was terrified. And did anyone catch what else Matthew said—and all of Jerusalem with him. Because when you have a fear-based ruler, people respond in fear to his actions. People brace for what might be the reaction and it's exhausting. The people were afraid of what Herod might do to their own people, but also the ones from Persia.

The people in Jerusalem were used to Herod's thirst for more. He was a shrewd leader—during his rule, he built up the economy based on war and exploitation, with high taxes for the working poor to benefit the rich. He was quick to enter into war, striking opponents with little awareness for how his actions impacted the soldiers fighting the wars. He was often considered to be ruthless, and as we would see after the wisemen leave, he would order the murder of all boys two years old and younger.

But I've jumped ahead. The wise men, wise for a reason, think something is up with Herod and they get a jump start on their trip to Bethlehem. As they follow the star, this new guide in their lives, they keep walking until the star settles over a house. When they enter into the house they find Mary and Jesus. They stepped into the frame of the house, kneeled, and presented their ever-helpful gifts for a toddler: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After their visit with Jesus and Mary, they had a dream not to return to Herod. Instead of going home through Jerusalem, Matthew says they went home by another way.

The wisemen met Jesus and Mary, had an encounter with love, and left a changed people. Their encounter with Jesus completely altered their lives. I imagine nothing ever seemed the same again when they returned home—they had walked new paths, had eaten new foods, and had an awareness of Herod at work in the world in a new way. .

On the last two Epiphanyes here at RBC, we've passed out Star Words. They are pieces of paper cut in the shape of stars with a word written on them. I always give the same disclaimer:

Star words is practiced all over the place in different churches and denominations as a centering activity for the year that is done on Epiphany. Given this is the day we celebrate the wise men following a star, which guided their path to Jesus and then also home, by another way, we're going to join in the star-following journey. They aren't required themes, they're just a word to ponder, to consider. A word that might cause us to pause throughout our day and take a deep breath, remembering that we are all following a star of love that points us toward Jesus.

Some of us had strong reactions for or about our words, some were curious, some of us felt like the words had picked us and some of us promptly forgot about whatever word in our post-holiday haze.

My word in 2019 was "humor." When I pulled that word last year in Epiphany, I didn't realize how much a little humor would help me along the way. It's not so much that I tried to laugh in every circumstance—that would have been wildly inappropriate, but it helped me to stay a bit light-hearted, when I can be too serious. 2019 was a year full of big transitions, deep grief, and every day life. Remembering to be a bit lighthearted came in pretty handy—when I remembered it.

I had intended for us to do some intentional checking in about our star words throughout the year, but then, last year was a little bit hectic and we didn't get to it. So, we will recommit to that this year with these new words!

You're invited to take a star as you leave. Just take the one that's on top—don't look for a word that you think you might like best. And don't find a word that you think a spouse or child or friends might need for the year. Of course, if someone has asked you to pick a star for them—go for it. What happens after that is between you and Jesus.

Next to those stars, in the back, you'll also find bags that look like this, enough for each person to take one. Inside you'll find this green paper, a piece of chalk, a beautiful Epiphany image.

There is an ancient tradition called "chalking the door" on Epiphany. Remembering that the wise men entered the home, through the door of the Holy Family, so we want to bless our homes in our coming and going in the New Year. We want to bless everyone who enters in and everyone who leaves. On the green paper, it gives you a blessing to read as you mark your doorframe and what to write with the chalk.

This year, we would write 20+C+M+B+20. The first and last numbers simply refer to the current year. The letters C M B come from the traditional names for the three wise men: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. Some also suggest "Christus Mansionem Benedicat" which means, "May Christ bless this dwelling!"

It's a meaningful way to mark an actual date. And it's chalk, not sharpie, for a reason. I like to mark my doorframe at eye height, so I see it when I leave. Some people like to do above the door, some people mark near the doorknob—it's up to you! Like I said, all of the instructions are included and between star words and chalking the door, I hope that Epiphany finds some deep meaning for you that transcends this place and takes you out into the world and your home.

As we go today, we go, looking east—in case we see a new star rising in the sky.

We look east, toward the place where Jesus was born, toward the place from where the wise men came, modern day Iran, places we pray for deep and abiding peace. We pray that we might all be willing to go home by another way if it means choosing life and peace for all people.

We go looking east—toward God's sunrise, which is always dawning upon us.

We go, looking east toward all that could be in 2020, as we share love, do justice, and build community.

Amen.