

ANOTHER ROAD

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January 4, 2026
Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus' birth – which happened in Bethlehem of Judea, during the reign of Herod – astrologers from the East arrived in Jerusalem. and asked, “Where is the newborn ruler of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay homage.” At this news Herod became greatly disturbed, as did all of Jerusalem. Summoning all the chief priests and religious scholars of the people, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they informed him. “Here is what the prophet has written: ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah, since from you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star’s appearance, Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed them, “Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report back to me – so that I may go and offer homage, too.” After their audience with the ruler, they set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child lay. They were overjoyed at seeing the star and, upon entering the house, found the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and paid homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route.



When you got to church this morning, I wonder how many of us were surprised to see all the Christmas decorations up still. I don't know if you still have Christmas decorations up at your place or not. I took most of our stuff away and put it down during this past week. And as you heard during our announcement time, we're planning on de-decorating the church from its Christmas mode uh beginning after church today. Now, it's not simply that we decided to wait until that time between Christmas and New Year's was over before we thought about that. It's actually intentional even though it is four days into the new year and most of the world around us is ready to move beyond Christmas and into this new year.

This is something that happens every year in the life of the church if we follow a church calendar because Christmas feels done. But technically, like the song, we're only on the 11th day of Christmas. There are pipers piping. Still drums to go. It's still the Christmas season in the church calendar. But today I decided to ignore the revised common lectionary readings for this second Sunday after Christmas: which would have included some words from Jeremiah 31 all about a homecoming celebration as a people come back to a rich and fertile land after a time of being away. and also the second half of the first chapter of John, the second conversation about the word becoming flesh. Instead, today we heard one of the readings that is designated for this coming

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Tuesday. Now, given that we are not part of a church tradition that tends to have a lot of midweek services, I decided to pull those readings into today rather than invite you all back on Tuesday for a special service because Tuesday is the day we begin a new season in the church year that follows Christmas. And January 6th every year is always that 13th day after Christmas. It's the day we hear the story of those wise ones, those magi coming from the east. And you can see in our manger scene up here that the wise ones who've been making their way down the aisle have arrived with Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Now you just have to kind of ignore the fact that there actually is no manger in the wise one story. It says that they went to a house; maybe even as far back as two years since they started their journey there. The wise ones is not just an add-on to the familiar story of the manger in Luke. That's an interesting tale and I've commented on that a few times and you can look up the things that are common and different between Matthew and Luke. But that's not my sermon for today.

January 6th is always the day of Epiphany, the start of a new time. Epiphany is a word that comes to us from the Greek that means something that's been manifested or to be revealed or something to appear, to shine, to show; it's something that just comes into our midst that we notice because it's different from what was there before.

In the early third century of this era in the Greek speaking part of the Roman Empire - in the east of the Roman Empire. - Epiphany was a day to remember Jesus' baptism. By the mid 4th century, in the 360s or so, it was kind of a dual feast. They celebrated Jesus' baptism but also Jesus' birth and particularly focusing on those wise ones. But in the Latin speaking western empire is where we got the real focus on the magi because the birth (as in Luke) was celebrated earlier. Sometimes you got a three-fold thing with the magi, but also the baptism and the miracle of wine appearing out of water: the wedding at Cana story. It was in 380 that someone named Gregory of Nazianzus preached two sermons. On the sixth on Epiphany, he preached about the magi and then on the next day (on the seventh) preached about Jesus' baptism. And that began the tradition of separating those two conversations. In modern church calendars, Epiphany is January 6th. And then the first Sunday that follows January 6th is when we often read about the baptism of Jesus. But for now, let's try and forget what we know about Luke. Forget about Gabriel talking to Mary and the census bringing the family to Bethlehem. Forget about the manger. Forget about the shepherds and the angels. And let's imagine just what we hear from Matthew that we heard today.

If we'd started earlier, if we'd started in chapter 1, we would have heard that Matthew begins with a paternal genealogy for Jesus, going all the way from Abraham right up to Joseph, but dividing it into three parts, going from Abraham to David and then Solomon, David's successor, to Jeconiah, who was the king of Israel when the Babylonian exile started. And then Shealtiel who's the first ruler after the exile began all the way up to Joseph. And then at the very end it turns from a paternal genealogy to a maternal genealogy because it says that Jacob was the father of Joseph who was the husband of Mary and Mary was the mother of Jesus.

Luke also has a genealogy that happens after the Christmas stories (actually after Jesus begins his ministry), starting with Jesus ("was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph") and working all the way back to Adam.

The other thing we hear in Matthew is that dreams are what convinced Joseph to marry Mary. Mary was pregnant. Joseph knew he was not the father. He was going to divorce her quietly. And then an angel appears to him in a dream, convinces him to marry Mary. And then just before what we read today, it says in Matthew at the end of chapter 1, *Joseph took Mary home as his wife, but he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth. Joseph gave him the name Jesus.* And then the very next verse is what we started with today. *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem (this is the first time Bethlehem's mentioned in the story) during the reign of King*

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Herod, astrologers from the east came to Jerusalem. And we know the rest.

Magi in the text of the New Testament is a plural of magus, which is the Greek version of an old Persian phrase that often was a religious term for priests who followed Zarastor. So, Zerastapharianism. They were seen as knowledgeable. They were keepers of the tradition. They were aware of the science of the day and the knowledge of the day. It said that Babylonians learned their astrology from Zorastor from the traditions of these magi in the Greco Roman period: Alexander the Great through to the Roman Empire. Magus is associated with those Iranian expats who were living in Asia Minor and it was not always a term of compliment. It's more of a slur and it was started to be associated with the Greek word for magic (which is similar but not fully related) meaning that these Iranian wise ones were purported to be able to use supernatural means to affect the natural world, i.e. magic. Magus was a negative term to be a sorcerer: to be someone who tricks people into believing things that aren't really true; a charlatan. That's the context of what is assumed about the visitors when they show up. and meet with Herod.

The pivotal character in Matthew 2 is really not Mary or Joseph. It's not even Jesus. It's not the magi. The pivotal character is Herod. Magi show up and say, "Our study of the sky convinces us that there is a new king in Judea, and we want to know where that is." And for some reason, they felt motivated to travel from ancient Persia to honor and offer gifts to this young new ruler. And it makes perfect sense that they decided to check with Herod. As I was saying earlier, Jerusalem was the seat of power. Jerusalem was where the current king of Judea lived. And so it makes sense that they go there maybe expecting that there is a child in Herod's household. *Where is the one born to be king of Judea? We saw his star in the east and we've come to worship.* It's interesting that the magi are not seen as charlatans by Herod. He takes them seriously and he calls his experts in. He says, "Well, what does our tradition say about the Messiah?" He's already interpreting what the magi are saying is that this is referring to the idea that David like king will once again emerge in Israel and restore the nation to its fullness as it was during David's time. It would be a practical divinely anointed king that would restore Israel to its greatness. Clearly that's what Herod is worried about. He's not worried or thinking about Messiah in terms of a spiritual manifestation of God as the early Christians would later interpret that phrasing. Herod is not excited about any claim to Judean power because he had Roman approval. So he was worried about his position being usurped. But maybe he was also worried about a Roman reaction to a to a homegrown leader that didn't have their blessing. I think of how Caiaphas sings about this in Jesus Christ Superstar. *I see bad things arising the crowd crown king which the Romans would ban. I see blood and destruction our elimination because of one man.* Maybe there was a little bit of that worry in Herod as well. not only that he would lose his power, but that the people of Judea would be *more* under the thumb of the Roman Empire.

And so Herod sends these magi to Bethlehem, which is where the scholars pointing to a passage from Micah say that this king in David's line would be born. And he asked the magi to return with details of exactly where they found this young king. And we heard the story how they found Mary and Jesus in a home. They offered gifts, but their instinct was to not trust Herod's intentions. They were wise enough that they heard in Herod's reaction somehow that he really wasn't interested in simply knowing and honoring the birth of this young king. And so after finding Jesus and after giving their gifts, they go back to their country by another road. Their original route to Bethlehem came through Jerusalem and this time they took maybe the more direct southern route missing Jerusalem altogether and went back to the east. Last week I talked about the other roads that Joseph and his family went down after the magi's visit about going into Egypt and then later going up to Galilee. The magi went down a different road as well.

Now every culture that has emerged in our world has measured time largely based on the lunar cycles. For

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most cultures that are away from the equator that see the variations in the year, the planting and the harvest seasons also help dictate how time is measured. There is some measure of solar cycles as well, the lunar cycle and then adapting it to fit a solar cycle (adding extra days here and there).

New Year Days varies from culture to culture and place to place. Many base their New Year's on a lunar cycle, some on the solar. Many see New Year's around the spring equinox, the beginning of the time of planting. By the 150s before Jesus time there was a Roman tradition, at the beginning of January, that they would inaugurate new consul members: new highranking public officials. January was named after the Roman god Janus: who is a god of duality and time. Depictions of Janus often had two heads facing in different directions. Janus is the god of gates, of doorways, of passages, of frames, of transitions, of beginnings and endings. And so it made sense to inaugurate people beginning new terms as consuls in the month honored for Janus.

Even though for much of the time since Jesus' birth, most of the world have used lunar or solar calendars to signify the way they keep track of time. It really wasn't consistent until maybe the 1700s that most civil calendars begin the year on January 1st. It's an artificial line between pages, an artificial series of numbers and dates. But it always seems to be that turning of the page from December to January is akin to a reset. Emotionally, intellectually, we allow ourselves to see that this is a significant turn of the page, literally. And many of us treat the new year as a time of new starts, of open possibilities, of seeking positive life paths, wondering what's down another road. For whatever reason, the new year has always been a time in most of our lifetimes to look into what might be new and different on the path that lay before us, where those new and different roads might lead us. You may or may not know that the Spirit of Hope Leadership Team, in other words, our church board, is going to hold a future focused retreat in a few weeks. We're going to kind of do a little bit of our own New Year's reset, imagining all the roads before us.

Personally, I'm not one who is prone to make a list of New Year's resolutions, but it is easy for me at this time of year to imagine changing certain life trajectories in some way or another. Not that January is exclusively a month to do that, but it always seems to come to mind. It's an easy time to think in that way. Spiritually and secularly, I believe in the value of regularly examining our own life directions. We can look on the paths that we're on and we can think about what is helpful, what still gives us life, what's positive, what's instructive, where the potential growth is. And we can also look and say, well, what on that path is getting in the way of me being my best self. We also have to consider how much opportunity or possibility there is to change direction because sometimes there are things beyond our control or influence. Still even on the most intransitive path, we usually will be able to find small but meaningful change opportunities that maybe allow us to be a bit kinder or a bit happier or more compassionate or forgiving or just or feel more who we want to be.

Luke's gospel narrated that angels appeared as messengers of God. That it was the angel Gabriel (who's also mentioned in the book of Daniel) who appears to Zechariah and talks about his elderly spouse giving birth to John. Gabriel also visits young Mary. An unnamed angel visits shepherds on a hillside who is joined by a heavenly host choir who are also referred to as angels. In Matthew, the divine insight is a little less direct. It's not an angel appearing directly in front of someone like a physical conversation between another person. Angels appear in Matthew in dreams. *Merry Mary; call the baby Jesus. Flee to Egypt. Herod's gone. You can go back to the land of Israel, but maybe relocate to Galilee.* The magi were motivated by dreams as well. *Don't go back to Herod.* Except for one other place. This is the only time dreams are mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew. The only other time comes later in the story and it's Pilate considering Jesus' fate and his wife says, "Don't have anything to do with this person. He's innocent. I'm being haunted by a dream I just had about him." I interpret Matthew using dream language as a means of divine conversation, as a method to explain the insight and the inspiration that Joseph and the Magi had, not coming from a physically manifested presence,

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but waking up in the morning with new insight. I'm pretty sure that most of what I dream about is not usually made up of God talking to me. If so, God has some interesting problems that I might be interested in learning about. But there's much research that goes into dreaming that says it can be a time where we just think differently when the parts of our mind that are less active in the waking world get a little bit of neuron firing and do some interesting work. As a university student, I used to keep a pen and paper right on my nightstand because I would come up with the best ideas for term papers and things like that in dreams and I would not want to trust myself to remember them in the morning.

One of the best things that I get out of this Matthew reading today is that we can listen to those still small voices that might inspire us to embrace better and deeper lives. Conscious thoughts, including those inspired from what we glean from our unconscious times.

If New Year's is a time that you imagine changes, that you imagine growth, that you imagine learning, allow yourself to include the health and direction of your spirit in that thought as well. Ponder the guidance of scripture. Think about what was important to Jesus and the early followers of Jesus and imagine where your life's journey might be taking you next and which road that will be on.

Let's pray. Thank you God for this day and for the many ways we learn and are inspired. Amen.

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