

Come, Holy Spirit, giver of gifts: open our ears to hear you speak to us. Amen.

What were they looking for, these astronomers/sages/wise men from "the East?"
Were they looking for a new king, or to make an alliance,
were they simply so thunderstruck by the magnitude of this new star,
maybe a super nova, that they had to follow the trail to the end?

What are we looking for, we who gather every Sunday, sometimes midweek?
We who pray and read the ancient scriptures to see what word they have for us?
What are you looking for? Peace? Solace? Inspiration? Direction? Vocation?
Mission? To make meaning? To make a difference?

They were looking for someone their reading of the stars said was a king.
When they got to the end of their trail they found a child in a house
with his mother. We don't know where Joseph was at that hour, that day...
Joseph who would soon be warned by an angel in a dream to take his young
family away from Israel, out of the reach of the paranoid King Herod.
And if they were surprised not to have been led to a palace or a grown person,
they did not show it in their actions.

They were so sure they'd been led by that star to the right place,
that they trusted that this was in a fact a king.

They knelt to honor him, and they opened their treasure chests
and gave him gifts fit for a king, tributes to his authority:
gold for his royalty; frankincense for the priestly function he would serve;
myrrh, the strangest gift, foreshadowing his death.

We are not told what they were looking for, and may not know what we are,
but we can learn a lot from these sages to guide us in our finding Jesus.
These are the basic tools of the spiritual life, and if we follow them,
we will grow closer to God. That is my prayer for this community.

Discernment – they were always scanning the heavens, and studying,
and they knew the night sky so well they knew when a new star appeared.

How do we walk in faith? By knowing God's word well enough
to know when something we feel accords with Scripture.

By spending enough time with Jesus to know when he's prompting us.
By becoming familiar with the ways the Holy Spirit nudges us.
By knowing ourselves well enough to recognize a new energy or sign.
It takes more than an hour a week, my friends – it takes joyful engagement
in the life of God through spiritual practices that give us life.
How do you discern God's invitations? (*Call to priesthood...*)

Intentional Planning – when they had discerned what this new star meant,
they knew it had implications for them. They had to meet this king.
So they prepared for a long journey, bringing everything they might need.
No doubt they had mapped the journey; they brought provisions, and camels,
and people to make food, and money to spend along the way...

In our spiritual journeys, what do we need?
Time... open hearts... journal... traveling companions...

Willingness to Ask Directions – it's a staple of domestic comedies that men
don't want to ask directions, but these wise men did. That star got them to the
right country, but then they thought it prudent to ask the king where his heir
would be found, little knowing the geopolitical sandstorm they were kicking up.

It seems, from the way the story is told, that the star had petered out,
or disappeared – which is how our spiritual lives often unfold.
We have a clear sense of God's presence, or guidance, and set our course...
and then somewhere along the line that power and presence seem to fade,
that peace goes away.

That's when we need to find other travelers, other people with a stake in this,
and seek their wisdom. A Christian life in which we never talk to other people
about our faith is a very shallow one. We need each other's stories.

I want every person who is active at either Christ Church to be meeting with other
members weekly, to check-in, talk about where we've seen God or not,
where we've struggled, where we've found joy.

I cannot tell you how much that would deepen our faith and make us a contagious
community. I was always challenged by the logistics of such groups,
but now that we can meet on Zoom or in Facebook rooms,
there is no impediment. Please say yes when you get that invitation.

Those wise men got directions from Herod's court, even if the king was being devious – and when they got close that star shone bright again, confirming that they were in the right place.

That is how it is with God – we will always get confirmation eventually, but sometimes we have to walk in the dark trusting we're on the right road.

Celebration – When they got to Bethlehem they rejoiced. “They were overwhelmed with joy.” That's what happens when we realize God came through, again. That's the effect that meeting Jesus is meant to have.

When we gather each Sunday, we are celebrating all the places we met Jesus during the week, sharing those stories with each other, seeking guidance for the next leg of our journey. So we want our songs joyful and our liturgies alive.

Take another road – Our magi were warned not to return to King Herod, so they found another way home. There is always another road.

The life of God is always forward, not back.

If we look for Jesus in the last place we saw him, try to set up the same circumstances, we're often disappointed, because he's ahead of us on the road.

I'm in a different place than I was on my ordination day –

God has had other roads for me, one of which led me here.

What unexpected turns has your route taken in life? Have you gotten good at saying yes to the alternative route? That is often where God is to be found.

In a few days, we will celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany –

yes, that is what January 6 is all about, and has been for two millennia.

Until the 4th century, Epiphany was the big Christian holiday, bigger than Easter.

It was the great festival of the inbreaking Light into the world's darkness, the celebration of the unveiling, the revealing, the manifesting, the making known of the mystery of the ages about God's great plan to bring the world back into God's embrace.

We are part of that great plan –

as we learn to discern, plan with intention, ask directions, celebrate – and trust that God will lead us home, no matter what road we take.

Amen.

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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." 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.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

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. **And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.**

Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.