

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ  
The Second Sunday After Christmas ~ January 3, 2021  
Texts: Isaiah 60: 1–6  
Matthew 2: 1–12

### The Magi's Wrong Turn

The proscribed text for the second Sunday after Christmas is the very first part of John's gospel, that lovely, poetic part where the Word is made flesh and dwells among us.

But I'm drawn to the texts for Epiphany — which is always on January 6<sup>th</sup>. An epiphany is an "aha" moment — but Epiphany — with a capital E — is a Christian celebration of Christ's divinity. And the most famous text for Epiphany is this one from Matthew's gospel.

The story is called *The Visit of the Magi*. This story, this incarnation of God in Christ, this epiphany of who Jesus is, this is the story we tell every year at this time whether it is using John's vision of the Word made flesh, or Matthew's vision of the Magi.

Today we turn to the story of Epiphany as Matthew tells it. It begins with prophesy.

Prophesy is one of those rare events that when uttered by the prophet is sometimes heard with fear and trembling and others times with great joy. Joy is what Isaiah had in mind when he declared to the people, "Arise, shine, for your light is come!"

And prophesy, though uttered at a point in time and for a particular time in history, has a way of becoming timeless.

In the ancient world it was commonly believed that unusual stellar events were the precursors of unusual earthly events — events predicted by the prophets. Two thousand years ago one such stellar event occurred. A star rose in the eastern night sky. And it meant something really big, really important — like the birth of a new king. Perhaps it was the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn in the evening sky, an exceedingly rare event that just happened again, after centuries, on this winter's solstice.

Magi, ancient astrologers — the educated class in Ancient Persia — saw this unusual star rising and studied it. They came to the conclusion east was the direction to travel in order to find out what kingly birth this magnificent light in the sky portended.

Imagine then, these sagely and learned men pouring over maps and charts. Who knows how long they labored or what sources they consulted. But they came to the conclusion that Jerusalem must be the place.

Something so unusual and spectacular could only happen in a place as urban and cosmopolitan as Jerusalem with its mighty city walls, elaborate gates and glorious temple.

So they loaded up the camels and eastward and long they traveled.

They must have been a sight for sore eyes as they passed through the mighty gates of Jerusalem. They asked: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?”

The whole city was abuzz and not in a good way. “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him.”

Imagine a reigning king hearing this, what of his own children and heirs? What was to become of them? This new king, would he usurp Herod’s lineage?

But there, in back of every one’s collective memory, is that ancient biblical prophesy of Isaiah. “Arise, shine, your light has come.” Was this doomsday for Herod?

So Herod did what one might expect. He called together all the best and brightest biblical scholars in all Jerusalem and asked them: “Where was this Messiah going to be born?”

“You’re looking at the wrong prophecy,” they tell Herod.

Herod must have been scratching his head in disbelief. After all, Isaiah ‘twas foretold it — and Isaiah couldn’t be wrong. Obviously the Magi thought so too.

“No,” the scholars insisted, and they produced the scroll of another prophet’s writings — the scroll of Micah. Now if length of the scroll were the measuring stick, then Isaiah’s scroll would stretch nearly the length of the city of Jerusalem. But they pull out the small scroll of the prophet Micah, a minor prophet by Isaiah’s standards.

They unroll and point — and timidly they read:

“But you, Bethlehem, David’s country, the runt of the litter — from you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule Israel. He’ll be no upstart, no pretender. His family tree is ancient and distinguished.

“Meanwhile, Israel will be in foster homes until the birth pangs are over and the child is born, and the scattered brothers come back home to the family of Israel.

“He will stand tall in his shepherd-rule by God’s strength, centered in the majesty of God-Revealed. And the people will have a good and safe home for the whole world will hold him in respect — Peacemaker of the world!” (*The Message*)

Bethlehem, Herod muses, not Jerusalem, hmmm. Herod’s eyes glint with an evil plan. What better way to humble these mighty visitors than to send them on a wild goose chase to the rural backwater town of Bethlehem. Let *them* get their fine clothes muddy and dusty looking for this child.

“You’ve taken a wrong turn,” he tells the Magi in secret, “the child is not to be found here but in Bethlehem, nine miles south of here. Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.”

Armed with Herod’s new directions the Magi once again set off. Then, an amazing thing, the star appeared again, the same one they had seen in the eastern skies, amazing because Bethlehem is more south than east of Jerusalem.

But it led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! What a convergence.

They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary. Overcome they kneeled and worshipped him. Then they opened up their luggage and presented him with lavish gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Fortunately, in a dream they were warned not to reveal this to Herod. And fortunately, too, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt.

The rest is history, so to speak.

But what does all this mean for us?

In this story of competing prophecies lies the clue for what this baby king will do and what this kingdom will be like.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the voice of the prophet Micah “is the voice of a peasant hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished, that will organize the peasant land in resistance to imperial threat.

Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground.”

And honestly, I can't think of anything more needed today than to take the focus off the high and mighty and to pay attention to the folks on the ground.

Brueggemann goes on to say that: “The narrative of Epiphany is the story of these two human communities: Jerusalem, with its great pretensions, and Bethlehem, with its modest promises.

We can choose, he says, a ‘return to normalcy’ in a triumphalist mode, a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own self the seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability. It is amazing — the true accent of epiphany — that the wise men do not resist this alternative but go on to the village.

“Rather than hesitate or resist, he says, they re-organize their wealth and learning, and re-orient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.” (“Off by Nine Miles, *The Christian Century*, December 19-26, 2001, p. 15)

What he's saying is that we've got two alternative ways of envisioning “God with us.”

Isaiah 60 says that the glory of the Lord is most likely to come through the powerful people in powerful places like Jerusalem.

But Micah turns the table and says no. Bethlehem is the place, a more modest place than Jerusalem to be sure. And a baby lying in a feeding trough is a quite different way to get things done than through a powerful king on a throne.

Herod took decisive action to try to keep things under control. But Micah tells us that God slips in at odd times and in odd places, taking the future out of our hands and away from our control. Here are two different pictures of how God gets things done.

What if Herod's bible scholars had only remembered Isaiah 60? And the Magi were advised to hang around Jerusalem and wait for a royal birth?

They would have missed the Christ Child and they would have mistakenly thought that their fate, their prestige, and their control lie in the hands of the supposedly powerful like Herod.

But that's not what happened. Those wise Magi found the tiny king and humbled themselves.

"Our task," as Brueggemann puts it, "is to let the vulnerability of Micah 2 disrupt the self-congratulation of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place. We are off by nine miles. We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency."

Epiphany is a good time to take the journey, because the pandemic chaos, and the economic and political upheaval in our world today reminds us of the shambles that can come through our excessive pretensions.

"The way beyond it," says Brueggemann, "is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares."

The Magi — outsiders and Gentiles — made that journey into vulnerability. And that king — that tiny vulnerable king — bids us to follow. With Jesus as our guide we won't take a wrong turn.