

“Rerouted, Not Misrouted”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Epiphany

By marking Epiphany five days before its traditional January 6 date, it offers a way for us to celebrate the arrival of those mysterious magi, then pack them away to begin the new year. Our brothers and sisters in most Orthodox traditions don't have that luxury as they are still waiting until next Saturday to celebrate Jesus' birth, and until January 19<sup>th</sup> for the gold, frankincense and myrrh to be presented to the Christ child.

Then again, perhaps you park the wise men and their camels by the manger when you set up your nativity scene in early December, rather than timing their arrival for the traditional twelfth day of Christmas. If so, they may have already headed home for their long winter's nap. Heading home is my focus this morning as we hear of the visit of the magi, often translated wise men, and sometimes known as kings, though I learned John Calvin vehemently opposed the kingly designation. [Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical\\_Magi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biblical_Magi)]

Matthew is distinct in telling the journey of these travelers, but provides few details. He provides neither their number, their races, their names, nor their means of transportation. Church tradition has filled in the details. The number three is likely based on the number of gifts listed, though in some traditions there are twelve magi. Their naming – traditionally Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior – is thought to identify the magi as scholars from three different regions of the East – India, Persia, Babylonia. None of this comes from Scripture.

One reason I like James Tissot's painting on the bulletin cover is that while three prominent figures lead the caravan, room is left that others riding camels may also be magi; or at the very least, be among the worshipers of the child who has been born King of the Jews. Given there are no gifts evident in the painting, a part of me imagines this might be the magi returning home, though I have found no other painting nor Christmas card that portray the wise men leaving. We tell and portray the story of their search for and journey to Bethlehem, with a star guiding their way until it stops. Yet, even then, their initial stop would be Jerusalem, and an audience with King Herod.

The exact identity of the magi is not known. It is widely conjectured they were connected with Zoroastrianism and astrology. As such, magi were not kings, but had access to kings. Even for those who give no credence to reading the stars, there is often still a curiosity about such predictions. While I do not seek out my daily horoscope, if I turn a page and happen upon it, I peek at my astrological reading, which today might be a prediction for the year ahead.

King Herod would be no less curious, particularly when he learns the magi are searching for a child born King of the Jews. Herod might have even said, “Hey, I'm Rome's King of the Jews.” Wiser men might have thought twice before arousing such fear in a king, and inciting what would be brutal revenge.

Let us hear Matthew's account of the journey and arrival of the magi, with an ear to God's hand in routing and rerouting these wise men from the East. 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;<sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.<sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:<sup>6</sup> ‘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.’”<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.<sup>8</sup> 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.”*

*<sup>9</sup>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.<sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The set up of Rome’s King of the Jews, Herod, with God’s King of the Jews, Jesus, is clear. It also marks a foreshadowing of the soldiers mocking of Jesus at his crucifixion – “Hail, King of the Jews” – and the “King of the Jews” sign that will be placed above his head on the cross. Matthew is not shy about placing the birth of Jesus in the midst of a political world and jealousies of power. Yet, guiding us through the story are not heroic figures who will appear in sequel episodes, but unnamed foreigners, Gentiles, non-Jews, who come from outside the immediate realm.

Now, again, one wonders why the magi asked about Jerusalem, and within earshot of the sitting king about the birthplace of a rival king. It does not seem to be a particularly wise decision for wise men. It struck fear in Herod, but then he turned to the established clergy for an answer. The chief priests and scribes look to the Scriptures, not the stars, and within the prophecy of Micah (5:2), they find the reference to Bethlehem.

The magi had come to big city Jerusalem, the logical location for a king to be born. It takes the religious scholars to properly identify the place. They tell Herod. He privately tells the wise men, vowing to visit and worship the child when they return and confirm the birthplace of this new king.

Let’s pause here. As we read this account in Matthew, we are reading a kind of historical narrative written almost 100 years after it occurred, and Matthew did not have the benefit of Wikipedia to fact check. As I shared last week, the infanticide Herod supposedly decreed following the magi’s failure to return to him is not corroborated by historians of that day. So, we read the Gospel narrative not so much for factual detail, but to understand the ways and workings of God, and the response of those within the story.

An easily missed subplot exists in our lesson. The chief priests and scribes have rightly determined the child is to be born in Bethlehem. Then what happens? The mysterious, stargazing, Gentile, magi go forth, to little Bethlehem. The Scripture reading religious folks stay home, in secure Jerusalem. As God speaks through dreams and Scriptures, sometimes it is “unlikely people who embrace God’s purposes.” [Carter, Warren, Matthew and the Margins, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005) p. 73.]

Throughout his ministry, Jesus will challenge those who believe they have it all together, are sure they know the truth, are obedient to sacred rituals, yet will not dare to step beyond the security they hold dear. The scribes and chief priests were model citizens, but also are beholden to Rome for their religious status as is Herod for his political appointment. I expect they would say things like, “That is all well and good, but we are responsible to keep the temple secure, so sometimes we have to compromise justice, or even truth, so as not to upset the powers that be.” Today, the church often says the same, with the powers that be often the larger givers. The question is with whom and to whom are we bowing – are we with the magi bowing before the child in the manger, are we with the chief priests and scribes bowing to Herod?

The story of the magi is often told as the journey to the manger. It can easily take on the themes of “follow your star,” or “follow your dream,” with Don Quixote not being far behind singing, “To dream the Impossible Dream.” Yet, while the star guided the wise men, first to Jerusalem, and then on to Bethlehem, the dream rerouted them home to continue their lives.

The magi had everything to lose by choosing the instructions in a dream over those of King Herod. How easy it would be for them to just follow orders and return to Herod. How natural it would have been to dismiss the dream as a nightmare. How rational to explain, “A god would never ask us to change our plans or risk reprisal.”

The challenge I find in the story of the magi is being alert to dreams God presents to me along my life journey, and then following the instructions, particularly if it means a rerouting of my planned itinerary. Yet, often it is not clear.

There have been times before and during my thirty-eight years of ordained ministry, when I have wondered if I might be being rerouted. While in seminary, I actually applied for a job with the probation department in Minneapolis, where I was doing a clinical pastoral education semester, and while I can’t remember which, I either received a second interview opportunity or was actually offered a position. Instead, I followed the advice of friends and returned to seminary. Other points in time, I have dreamed of having a fresh bread delivery service or beginning a woodworking business. I continued in ministry. The one rerouting we made was when Lynn and I packed up our family, and cut our income in half to work with Habitat for Humanity for five years. Even as I think back, I still wonder if I may have missed a dream to be rerouted because fear and comfort may have affected a decision.

I realize while I say I am open to God's word and direction, there is an ease and comfort in nestling amidst the familiar and secure, whether it be home, church or even nation. As such, I stand with the chief priests and scribes, who had knowledge, but did not act on it. If an actual call for a rerouting comes, my first response is often to deem it a misrouting. I heard it wrong. "God would never send me that way, or to that place, or to do that thing, or to preach that word." And if I surround myself with people like me, who share my beliefs, my economic class, it is easier to have confirmed that the dream is a misrouting, not a call to be rerouted. And while I may not be bowing to a tyrant like Herod, it will probably allow me the comfort of Jerusalem.

So, I think the goal for us is to find people willing to honestly engage us when we have rerouting dreams, so with the magi, we will know when we are being dared to return home by another road.