



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

January 2, 2022: Sermon “By Another Road”

Rev. David Jones

Our readings today are the ones for January 6, or for the Epiphany. The Epiphany is a single day in the Christian liturgical calendar, commemorating a single event—the witness of the star rising in the east that symbolizes the birth of the king of the Jews. As we read in the Gospel according to Matthew, wise men are the first to recognize this star and what it means.

The wise men are said to be from the East, they’re Persian maybe. They were men of stature and learning. Sometimes such men became rulers of a sort in their own right, which is maybe why we sometimes call them kings. But in modern terms, they are more like philosophers or scientists; and in any case they have the ability to speak with some authority about what the stars are doing.

But these men are not Jewish, and they are not of Israel. They’re travelers on the road. And when they see this great light and sort out what it means—that the new king of the Jews has been born—they naturally make for Jerusalem and go to the palace. If the king of the Jews has been born, this is where he should be. But the wise men do not know how things are in Jerusalem. They do not know that Rome rules over it through their client Herod. Herod is not a rightful king according to our scriptures; he is not anointed by God like David once was, but has been appointed by Caesar. The wise men do not realize the mistake they are making.

They’re telling this violent, repressive false king Herod that a new rival has been born under a star. So of course Herod gets spooked. This is very bad news to his cruel ears. Herod has become quite satisfied in his position, and he plans to pass his rule to his son and his grandson. He plays it cool though, and Herod and the ruling class in the palace are able to conceal their fear from these strange visitors. Away from the wise men, Herod consults his priests and scribes—the chattering classes who support Herod’s vindictive rule over the people. And they confirm that what the wise men have reported is probably true, and if it is, this child has surely been born in Bethlehem, the same town where the true king David was once born. This is very bad news for a bad man like Herod.

So Herod calls these wise men back to see him again. And still concealing his fear from them, he asks these wise men to find this future king and return to Jerusalem with the child’s exact location. He says he too wants to honor the child, but really he is hatching a terrible plan.

The wise men set out according to their knowledge of the stars. They follow this prophetic one that rises in the east all the way to the manger, where we have been sitting with this holy family. When they finally arrive, and they find the “little Babe, in a wretched hovel, wrapped in miserable rags,” bound up kindly in Mary’s arms—when they find that the true king is born among the poor and desperate, among the people who have hope against hope or not at all—they are overwhelmed with joy and they kneel to honor mother and child. All their wisdom led them first to the palace and then to this hovel; they had to overcome their assumptions, their ignorance despite all their learning. But in the end they found their way. And they arrived prepared with gifts.

Apart from a little gold, these gifts may seem small for a king—frankincense and myrrh are resin from trees and shrubs. But in New England we know something about how elaborate and costly the process is that transforms sap into something precious. In the time of these men and this child, frankincense and

myrrh were often used in religious rites and rituals; these are gifts that take the earth very seriously, and they add to rather than take from the glory of God's Creation. Combined with gold, the three gifts represent the power of the world, the power of kings, *and* the power of the sacred, the power of life and death on this beautiful earth. Such gifts would make sense and be dear to a family surviving so close to the soil.

This experience of the wise men is so transformative that it intrudes on their dreams; they gain new insight into Herod and the palace, into the condition of the people and the situation in Jerusalem. Though Herod had tried to deceive them, the star in the sky was truthful, and Mary and the child were truthful. Many things were revealed to them—they had a few epiphanies—and instead of returning to Jerusalem, they headed home by another road.

This is a great story. And it tells us a lot about how the evangelist who wrote it believed God would live if God became human and drew breath among us. For starters, God will assume the identity of an oppressed nation fighting for liberation. And God, as Saint Bernard described, will start life low, like the great majority of the people, who struggle to make ends meet, who struggle with money and debt, with work and with making a home. And God will frighten those who are powerful, and the powerful will persecute God, because God's willingness to suffer with us will one day turn the world upside down.

There are many amazing things happening in this scripture, but I want to really walk alongside our wise men this morning. They are not the heroes of our story—that's Mary. They're not the sidekick—that is Joseph. And they are not the Son of God. Nor are they the compassionate, creative love that is the source of all light and love. They are not even our guides, that's this great star rising that cannot be overcome by any darkness. And actually, they aren't really necessary to the story at all. Mary and her family are doing just fine without them.

In fact, the family is doing *better* without them. The wise men make a bit of a mess of things, don't they? Lost in their 'lives of the mind,' their chins tilting up toward the sky, their noses stuck in books and figures in the endless study of natural phenomena...the wise men clumsily reveal the identity of Herod's great challenger before he has even left his crib! Though they mean well, they manage to make life for this young family incredibly dangerous. Thanks to our foolhardy wise men—who are not from Judah or Israel, who do not know about life in Jerusalem or in the palace, who have no knowledge of power and no awareness of the fight now underway in the countryside between a rich few and the many peasants and craftspeople; because they have no understanding of how their actions will have consequences—Mary and Joseph will now have to flee with their child and go into hiding. As if this family has not already been through enough. The wise men are surely enlightened people who can interpret symbols. But they are dangerously naive about why a new king has been born. Mary is really quite forgiving to accept the gifts they have delivered to her child along with so much trouble.

Still, these wise men are likable characters. Because their heart is in the right place, isn't it? In the story, it seems like it is not until the warning in their dreams that they realize what they have done, and how dangerous this King Herod really is. It isn't until then that they decide not to report this baby's whereabouts to the plotting rulers in Jerusalem.

But...we all have dreams. How often are we transformed by them? How often have we dreamt of peace—of a new and simpler way of being—and been able to return to it by another road? For all the mess they've caused, it is remarkable that these learned men, who were so lavishly welcomed and respected (listened to) in the palace of the powerful, are so easily able to choose another path.

I find great hope in this story. Well, first it should be humbling. No matter how sure we are of something, no matter our credentials or our expertise, at the end of the day we always have something new to learn. And if we are not careful, and we stick our noses into things we don't really understand, we can do more harm than good. But, even if we have not been as humble as we should have been, even if we did make a mess of something, that does not mean we cannot turn around and go another way. The season of Epiphany for wise people, means going home by another road now that we have discovered the light where we did not expect it.

When I went to Jacksonville, Florida, I was fresh out of divinity school, and I was sure that I could get straight to work on Jacksonville's problems. But like our wise men, I soon found myself face to face with the real children of God, with the people who were from the city, who knew its past, who had already been fighting for years to organize their communities and their workplaces. I met people who had figured out that what seems true in theory is not true at all unless it is true in practice. The wise men thought that because they could read the stars, they could go to a palace and meet the anointed king. That's what was in their astronomy textbooks. But it wasn't until they met Herod and then Mary and her son—until they walked the streets of Jerusalem and then traveled the countryside to Bethlehem, until they mingled in the palace and saw a false king in robes, and then entered a hovel and saw a true one in rags—that they had a chance to see what their ideal looks like in reality. It is not that their learning was wrong, only that their learning was incomplete. Even though they had been misled by assumptions, they found their way.

There is surprising grace in this. The season of light after the Epiphany is a reminder to us that God is doing something great, something transformative, whether we quite understand it or not. And it is so great that even if we accidentally make things worse, it will overcome us. As long as our heart is in the right place, as long as we really do mean well—as long as we keep trying to share ourselves, even our incomplete knowledge, with those who need change, who need justice—we will find who we are looking for. We will find the people who really understand what God is up against in this world. We will find the real heroes of the story, the families and the children already transforming the world, and then what is false and what is true will be revealed.

God has been born, and a great light that cannot be overcome is showing us an unexpected way. As long as our hearts are in the right place, we will get there together. And we will bear gifts to honor the ones who are already at work changing this world, and we will travel with them by another road; we shall see and be radiant, our hearts shall thrill and rejoice, and the wealth of nations shall come to *all*.

Alleluia and amen.