

sermon-01/04/08 Newport Presbyterian Church  
“Walking A Different Road”  
Matt. 2:1-12  
By Jim Patten

This familiar story in Matthew, one we read every Epiphany Sunday, is a story about power, epiphanies and new perspectives. It is a story with stark contrasts. It is a story that invites us to enter in and look at our own lives.

First, it is a story about power. The contrasts here are between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, between Herod and the baby Jesus. As Walter Brueggemann has said, this is a story of “Jerusalem, with its great pretensions and Bethlehem, with its modest promises.”

Jerusalem had the powerful King Herod. He ruled the area for Rome. But, by the time the gospel of Matthew was written, Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome after the Jewish rebellion. Even places of power and prominence don't last forever.

Herod used his power to control and destroy. As scholars tell us when Herod was frightened, people died. He was absolutely ruthless in his use of power. And when that power was threatened, no one was safe, not even his own children. Herod is a great example of the corrupting influence of power and the awful consequences of responding out of fear.

Bethlehem, in contrast, was an insignificant little town on the margins of power. The prophet Micah had given up on Jerusalem and pinned his hopes on Bethlehem for the birthplace of the Messiah. Jesus, the true king of Israel, was in Bethlehem. This king expressed his power in seeming weakness and vulnerability. His power did not destroy, but had the ability to heal and unite. Even outsiders were welcomed into his kingdom, represented by the Magi in the story.

This is a story about epiphanies. An epiphany is a manifestation of God in the world. Epiphanies often involved light, mystery, and even visions. The event we call the Epiphany, of course, happened in this first century story, but epiphanies happen all the time, even in our day.

The magi can teach us about how to recognize epiphanies. They were able to see the star and follow it because of their study of the night sky and the natural world. Such study took them a good distance in their journey. Note, however, they did not get to their destination until they heard the wisdom of the scriptures. Their study got them to Jerusalem. It was God's voice in the scriptures that got them to Bethlehem.

The magi in this story stand in stark contrast to the good religious people in that day, the priests and scribes. Those religious leaders knew the scriptures. They could go right to Micah and find his words on where the Messiah was to be found. Sadly, they did not act

on that knowledge. They represent our tendency to go to the scriptures for answers, but not letting the scriptures get under our skins and change the way we live.

It is very tempting to see the Bible as either an ancient, irrelevant book, or as an answer book, teaching us doctrines and other bits of information. But, when we let the Bible begin to interpret our lives, when we let it speak to those vulnerable places where decisions are made and actions are planned, it becomes a radical book indeed.

The magi let their study of nature and the knowledge given to them from the scriptures determine how they would act. They remind us if we are to see any epiphanies in our day we, too, will need to study carefully and even learn from others. But, we will need to act on what we learn. What do you do in your lives to prepare to recognize God's manifestations in the world?

This story is also about new perspectives. When we are open to God's epiphanies, we change. One commentator says the only way to grow spiritually is to travel. He is talking about inner traveling. The only way to grow is to explore the inner realms of the Spirit inside each of us.

Houston Smith once had a PBS series on the world's religions. He called that series, "The Long Search." Religion, at its best, is about the search for meaning, for peace, for love, for connection. I suspect each one of us wants all of those things. We may not talk about them in a very religious way, using religious language or symbols, but we are all on the long search.

When our study and preparation allows us to follow the star of Christ, so to speak, there will be two results: joy, and walking by a different road. When the magi arrived at Bethlehem our scriptures said "they were overwhelmed with joy." Certainly joy is part of the inner journey toward meaning and God. If our inner traveling does not have any joy, we might want to reconsider the road we have been traveling.

But, once our journey leads us to its destination, however transitory that destination is, we are changed. We never fully arrive at our ultimate destination while we live on this earth, but we do come to some stopping points where we see God more clearly. And when we do, we cannot travel by the same road we had been traveling.

The magi left by another road after paying homage to the baby king. They had been warned in a dream, (another symbol of divine speech) and they left by another road. We simply cannot act in the same tired, old ways when we encounter the light of God. It changes us.

The gifts the magi gave to the baby Jesus capture the meaning of this story in their own way. They are strange gifts to be sure. They are symbolic gifts. The gold was a gift to royalty. The frankincense was fit for priests and those representing divinity. Myrrh was the spice used in burials. Thus it prefigured Jesus death on the cross. Christmas and Good Friday were brought together in that strange gift.

A poem by Jan Berry in the book *Bread of Tomorrow*, sums up this story quite well. It is called "God-with-us"

God of gold, we seek your glory:  
the richness that transforms our drabness into colour,  
and brightens our dullness with vibrant light;  
your wonder and joy at the heart of all life.

God of incense, we offer you our prayer:  
our spoken and unspeakable longings, our questioning of truth,  
our search for your mystery deep within.

God of myrrh, we cry out to you in our suffering:  
the pain of all our rejections and bereavements,  
our baffled despair at underserved suffering,  
our rage at continuing injustice;  
and we embrace you, God-with-us,  
in our wealth, in our yearning, in our anger and loss.

Amen