

## Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

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Grace and peace to you from Christ the King. Amen.

So, the story continues. We know it well and digest it in bite sized portions over the Christmas break, finally coming to the part of the wise “men” or “travelers” or “astrologers” as this translation describes. Let’s not get hung up on particular words this morning!

Matthew’s story of the wealthy and wise visitors is familiar and rich in symbolism. It is a story about travelling, but not so much about the *places* we might go. Rather, it describes how we are changed as we journey in faith. God changes us, calling us to maturity. Faith always calls us to examine our lives and the world we live within, asking us to “do different.”

When our young family was still young, our kids had their places. When we traveled, in the backseat of the car our daughter sat on the passenger side and our son on the driver’s side. In the truck it was the opposite. I don’t know how that ever got decided, but that’s the way it was. At the kitchen table, we always sat in the same seats. At church, we sat in the first or second pew. You probably can relate – I know most of you sit in the same place each week and probably have your favorite comfy chair at home to read or watch TV. Such things are comfortable, familiar, and saves us having to make minute decisions or ending up in an argument over it. And this might work when it comes to keeping peace between siblings or establishing a seating plan, but I’m not here to ask you to simply change pews this morning.

As I said, faith always asks us to do different. The astrologers, listening to God’s prompting, followed a star, toting gifts for Mary and Joseph’s baby. Going back home should have been easy, they could just follow the same road back, but they didn’t. They were called to forge a new way as they left the holy family. That’s the way it often happens, we meet Jesus and our lives take a whole new direction. The journey took courage, it took wisdom to discern Herod’s intentions, it took flexibility as they listened to the Spirit’s prompting. That’s why they were traditionally called the “wise men,” because they didn’t let their own agendas or politics get in the way.

There are few clearer models from that time than Paul when it comes to doing differently. We know that he did a 180° at God's asking, completely abandoning his old ways that were comfortable and familiar. His story of change is called the Damascus Road story and it is well known. We heard this morning about one of the huge changes he made – that of welcoming Gentiles into the faith. In a Twitter worthy statement, Paul says, *mysteriously, the Gentiles are heirs just as the [people of Israel] are* (Eph 3:6.) In today's lingo – that statement would have gone "viral," because it was fresh, new, and dangerous. Never before had anyone proposed to welcome everyone into faith, or to claim that everyone had a place in God's family. There were Jews and there were Gentiles, period. Everyone knew that Yahweh was the God of the Israelites, a covenant signed and sealed millennia before. Paul, himself a well-respected Israelite, listened to God more than his own ways, more than his tradition and he "did different" with God's guidance. And that's how God's love and welcome traveled 2000 years and came to us, the Gentiles.

God continues the challenge and Holy Spirit has taken on some big ones. We can certainly point to projects like the bathroom renovation or to ministry such as our persistent "all are welcome and all means all." It was before my time here, but I imagine at one time even moving to projected worship was a big change. Today we are beginning to learn about what it means to be missional and to undertake deeper learning about inclusion. If you've been here through some of these changes, you know it isn't always easy, but you would also probably agree with me that we'll never go back. We're not going to put everything back in place the way it was in the washroom; we're not going to stop proclaiming God's radical welcome.

As we come into a new year, it's an opportune time to listen to God's prompting again – what new thing is God prompting? What old thing is God asking us to "do different?" Do we dare to travel by another route other than our comfortable ways?

It's a critical question actually. Because the moment we stop listening to how God is asking us to do different, is like traveling the road back to Herod; it's dangerous.

When I was on sabbatical I kept asking myself what God wanted me to do differently when I returned. Ministry is wonderful and trying all at the same time. Yet, day after day, year after year, the work of being a pastor can get clogged with administration, business and just tiredness. Sabbatical provided the opportunity to reset, to re-imagine, to re-listen to God's call to ministry. It's not that I have answers yet, but I want to be open to change, willing to re-examine my old ways and practices to make room for God to work. So I

started a new practice. Each morning in my office the first hour is divided between planning ahead, study and prayer. It's not rocket science and it's not a trendy, new discovery, but simply trying a new practice is already empowering new perspectives. So, let me challenge you with a few small experiments:

If you sit in the same pew on Sunday mornings, try a few new seats over the month of January. I'm serious actually. In fact, think about where you sit in other places too – at the dinner table, board/council table, in the car, on the bus perhaps try a different spot or a new role or leaving one you've served in for a long time. What do you notice, what do you feel, who might you meet? This kind of thing might seem trite, but the willingness to do different in small things is not so different than the astrologers taking the first step to see the newborn Jesus. It's the openness that is important. It's the experiment that's important. Small steps can help us become open to possibilities, we learn to dream.

We could use some new thinking and particularly today I will mention stewardship. Our old, familiar ways of giving, helping, serving are in want of a God-makeover. The old familiar patterns have worn a smooth pathway, but in the last few years sharp stones and roots are beginning to poke through the ground threatening to stumble us. I haven't seen the final numbers for 2019, but I know we all feel the stress of a growing deficit toward the end of the year. I don't have an answer to this or a new program to introduce, because I believe this is something that will take all of us to pull together on. I'm not even trying to guilt you into giving more. What I am actually hoping for is openness. Are we open to doing different? To some serious conversations? What small action could you take, what new perspective might help us, what do we each need to “do different?”

We're not alone as we face the changes that need to come. As we learn a new way, God is beside us. We will look back a year from now and see how God has worked among us, calling us to new perspectives and practices and we might just admire the strides we have taken, the people we've become, how God has faithfully shaped us. We'll be wiser, our faith deeper, our family stronger. We'll be ready for the new things God will birth among us yet again.

Amen.