

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**B: Epiphany Sunday**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

**7 January 2024**  
**Salem, Bridgeport**

**“Follow the STAR!”**

Happy Epiphany Sunday!

Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, the day after the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, was actually yesterday,  
and so according to the liturgical calendar, we should be celebrating the baptism of our Lord today.  
But I just couldn't bring myself to do that – so we here at Salem are celebrating Epiphany Sunday!

We are celebrating it together today because we didn't celebrate it together yesterday,  
and I believe it's vital that we *do* celebrate it – for 3 reasons.

First, in the early church it was Epiphany, not Christmas, that was celebrated.

Easter was the most important festival,  
and Epiphany and Pentecost were the other 2 most important Christian holidays.  
While Epiphany has been celebrated since the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century,  
Christmas was not celebrated at all until the 4<sup>th</sup> century,  
and did not become a major Christian festival until the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

Second, Epiphany means revelation & the Epiphany season centers around 3 major festivals –  
the Epiphany of our Lord when the child Jesus was revealed to the magi to be the king of the Jews,  
the Baptism of our Lord when Jesus was revealed to Jesus himself to be God's beloved son,  
& the Transfiguration of our Lord when Jesus was revealed to Peter, James & John to be God's beloved son.  
To begin the season of Epiphany without celebrating the 1<sup>st</sup> of those 3 festivals  
seems to me to be as crazy as celebrating the Easter season without celebrating Easter Day!

Third, Matthew's story of the magi is the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the Christmas story that Luke begins.  
In our minds it's all one story, but if you go back and look at the gospels,  
Mark has no Christmas story but begins with the baptism of Jesus,  
John proclaims the incarnation but includes no birth story,  
Luke's story is about shepherds and has no magi,  
and Matthew has magi but no shepherds.

Reading from Luke on Christmas Eve gives us only half of the story.

But reading from Matthew on Epiphany, gives us the rest.

And finally, Matthew's story is full of so much magic and mystery  
that it inspires our imaginations and speaks to our spirits.

Indeed, Matthew's part of the Christmas story

has perhaps inspired more art and literature and music and poetry than Luke's part.

And possibly that is because it invites us into the story in a profound way.

It may be difficult to relate to the shepherds' experience of a heavenly choir of angels,  
but which one of us cannot relate to the magi's journey, their spiritual quest,  
their seeking of meaning and purpose and fulfillment?

In fact, the 1<sup>st</sup> widely popular Christmas Carol written in America

by the Episcopal priest John Henry Hopkins, Jr in 1857,

demonstrates how the story of the magi so easily becomes our own personal story,  
as we sing not, “Those three kings...” but “We three kings of Orient are...”

And so today I'd like us to look at the 4 key actions of the magi which can guide our own actions this year.

## **First, they Saw the Significance of the Star.**

Now it's important to note that the God who made us and knows us and loves us speaks to us in ways that we can understand.

To shepherds, watching their flocks by night, perhaps passing the time playing their flutes or lutes, or simply gazing up into the starry night, God sent a heavenly choir of angels.

But to astrologers/astronomers God sent a star.

That star, or that particular combination of stars, or that cosmic event, was visible to all, and certainly to all those who studied the heavens, but it is likely that not everyone saw the significance.

I think it was Einstein who said that there are two ways of looking at life – one is as though nothing is a miracle and the other is as though everything is a miracle.

I certainly believe in miracles, in signs and wonders, in God sightings, so theoretically I believe everything is a miracle & God is always present & always at work, but practically speaking, I confess that I don't always see the miracles and I don't always sense God's presence and I don't always see God at work.

But I pray that I might grow in faith and hope and the knowledge of God, that my spiritual vision and hearing and sensing will improve, and that I will become more and more aware of God's presence and God's work and of the signs and wonders and miracles happening in and around and through me all of the time.

The Star was there for all to see, but likely not all saw it, and likely not all who saw it, saw its significance; but the magi did.

**And so we pray that we might See the Significance of the Star (or whatever sign) God sends us.**

## **Second, the magi Trusted enough to Take a leap of faith and set forth on their Travel.**

While not everyone saw the star, and while not everyone saw its significance, there were likely many who saw its significance, and yet did nothing.

We know that the magic came from the East, but we have no idea how far they came or how long it took.

They might have come from Persia or they might have come from China.

We do know that the Silk Road was over 4000 miles long, connecting Europe and Asia.

The journey from Persia to Bethlehem would have been about 1200 miles

and traveling in a caravan by camel at a rate of 20 miles/day would have taken a minimum of 2 months.

But if the magi had come from China, it would have taken at least 6 months, and, more likely, several years.

Marco Polo's journey with his father from Genoa, Italy to China took 3 years.

And from Herod's decision to slaughter all of the male Hebrew children age 2 and under, makes it likely it was a 2- to 3-year journey.

Not only was it a long journey, it was a risky one.

As a highly decentralized network, security was sparse.

Travelers faced not only long expanses of inhospitable terrain and ill-maintained roads, but constant threats of banditry and nomadic raiders.

Seeing the significance of the star was not sufficient;

it also took enough trust to take that leap of faith, and set out on such a trek.

While others may have seen the significance of the star,

they may not have had enough trust to take the next step, but the magi did.

**And so we pray that we might not only See the Significance of the Star but that we might have enough Trust to Take that leap of faith, and set out on our Trek to follow the star.**

**Third, the magi discovered that they must Adjust their plan to Align with scripture in order to Arrive at their destination.**

While the magi saw the star and had enough trust to follow it,  
their trust was not completely in God, for, without even being aware of it,  
they had made an assumption of their own – that the king would be born in the palace in the capital city.  
And so they end up asking the current king where they can find the new king.

Interestingly, when Herod asks the chief priests and advisors,  
they immediately know the answer from scripture – “in Bethlehem of Judea”.  
The chief priest scribes know what scripture says, and yet they are not the ones seeking the new king.  
The magi *are* seeking the new king,  
but they are seeking the king on the basis of their own assumptions, instead of on scripture,  
and so have been led to the wrong place.

Now in order to arrive at their destination, they need to adjust their route  
by asking for help and aligning their plan with scripture.  
So often we see the significance of a sign, and we trust and take the leap of faith and begin our traveling,  
but, without being even aware of it, we make assumptions that can end up leading us astray.  
Abraham and Sarah clearly heard that God would provide them with a child,  
but in their impatience they made an assumption that maybe they would have to help God along,  
which led Sarah giving Abraham her maid Hagar, and Abraham having the child Ishmael –  
who was *not* the child of God’s promise.

While others may have seen the significance of the star,  
they may not have had enough trust to take the next step, but the magi did.  
But even when the magi trusted enough to follow the star, they found that their assumptions had led them astray,  
and they needed to ask for advice and adjust their route so that it aligned with scripture.

**And so we pray that we might not only See the Significance of the Star  
& that we might not only have enough Trust to Take that leap of faith & set out on our Trek to follow the star,  
but that when we find ourselves going astray,  
we might Adjust our path to Align with scripture in order to Arrive.**

And finally, when the magi arrive, they Rejoice in the Radiance of God’s Reign.

*“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.  
On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother & they knelt down & paid him homage.  
Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”*

They were overwhelmed with joy, and they knelt down, and paid him homage –  
grown men kneeling before a child,  
wealthy men offering extravagant gifts to the child of a poor carpenter and his young wife,  
foreigners paying homage to a Jewish child living in a land of Roman occupation.

These magi were not only overcome by joy,  
but there was something about this child that caused them to respond with reverence,  
the reverence that one feels in the presence of a king and in the presence of the divine.

Because the magi saw the significance of the star,  
because they trusted enough to take a leap of faith, and set out on their track to follow the star,  
because when they went astray, they were willing to ask for advice & adjust the route to a line with scripture they arrived.  
And when they arrived, they rejoiced in the radiance of God’s reign.

But this is not just the story about some other people and some other time at some other place.  
It is a story that invites us into it.  
So it is no longer a story about *those* three kings but about *we* three kings.

**It becomes our story when we follow the STAR...  
when we See the Significance of the Star or whatever other Sign, God sends,  
when we Trust enough to Take a leap of faith, and set forth on our Trek to follow the star,  
when we are willing to Adjust our plan to Align with scripture in order to arrive,  
and when we respond by Rejoicing in the Radiance of God’s Reign.**

**May you follow the STAR to wherever God leads you! Amen**