

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12
Feast of the Epiphany Sunday, January 6, 2019
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ,

Let's begin with some historical background on our story about Three Wise Men from the East today – concerning geographical guides to travelers. Ancient travelers used landmarks (like mountains, rock formations, or large trees) to guide them. Sailors used the stars at night to keep them on course. For most of my life, I used paper folded highway maps to guide me on road trips (or from St. Paul to the far reaches of Minneapolis, Hennepin or Anoka County). This was all to the endless amusement and mockery of my children in the back seat.

So after the turn of the 21st century, my son Dave bought me a Garmin GPS for my birthday (I was in my mid-40s). I still depend on it, in my then-new 2002 Dodge Caravan. I used it to drive around southern California and LA in 2010, but I found it would lose connection crossing over from Moorhead to Fargo, North Dakota – the great American desert. I also learned that when you made a wrong turn, or change directions for an alternate route NOT SELECTED by GPS, an annoying voice would call out: “RECALCULATING!” Do you know this voice? So when I change my route, I often choose to say “recalculating” myself first, to deny her the satisfaction, and warn my wife that I am off course. And then there are Google Maps, Mapquest, and other competing directional mapping websites. What is your favorite? I have now discovered, with our new Honda, that you can connect Google-maps on your smartphone to your car as a hands-free device for your endless and safe traveling pleasure. Amazing!

But gone are the days when you can stop at a corner gas station on the road when you are lost, and ask for directions. I remember clearly doing this on many road trips in a strange city. Do you? That will show your age! The last time I did that, the kid in the convenience store didn't even know what street he was on, and looked at me like I was an alien from Mars. He then just went to his phone and looked up the place I asked him about, and told me to find in on mine. “Welcome to the 90s, George”, I thought – a line from *Father of the Bride*, a 90s movie.

Well, in the good old days, ancient travelers used the Bible for directions, or stopped by a king's palace to find their way. We know this from the story today, about three wise men who went on a road trip from Iran (known then as Persia), following a star to find a newborn King of the Jews. This is as good a reason as any to get out of the house with your astrologer friends, and try out your new camels out on a desert road. So they studied the stars and their astrological guides,

read ancient scriptures about the landmarks on the way to Jerusalem, packed their bags along with appropriate gifts for a king, and set out on their journey.

Matthew tells the story in chapter two, just after he told of the birth of Jesus. He quoted scripture himself, from Isaiah, that *“a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel”* – which means *“God is with us.”*

Matthew tells of three wise men (or Magi, a learned class from Persia) from the East) who came to Jerusalem in the time of King Herod, and asked him *“Where is this child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”* Well, this was news to King Herod, none of whose wives were pregnant at the time, so no child had been born at the palace. But being a paranoid leader and a pathological liar (a trait not limited to ancient times), Herod was frightened, concerned that there might be some threat to his throne represented by a homeless family and a child somewhere. So he called all of “his people”, his chief priests and scribes, “his generals”, homeland security and border police, and inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. The scribes looked it up, and quoted from the book of Micah, chapter 5, verse 2: *“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.”* Ah, so this is where he might find that child, and eliminate the threat. So Herod cleared the room and called the wise men back, learned from them about the star they were following and that it had appeared over Bethlehem. He told them to “go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, let me know so that I may also go and pay him homage.” So the wise men set out again, following the star to Bethlehem, which had stopped over the place where the child was, and worshipped him. They gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, which they also knew from chapter 60 of the prophet Isaiah, were gifts appropriate for the new king of Israel, if you are traveling by camel. You can see it all there in Isaiah’s giftster website in the Bible! But then the story takes a turn. The magi were warned in a dream (or a nightmare) NOT to return to King Herod, so they left for their own country by another road. RECALCULATING!

[Some sources say the three magi continued on their journey and ended up in Norway or Sweden with leftover spices from India, like cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, saffron and ginger, and so left them near Uppsala for Scandinavians to make cookies, spiced wine and *glogg* for the winter solstice and future “Christmas” feasting. This led to future Viking raids in search of more spices, but that’s another story!]

But Matthew just tells us that the three magi disappeared back to their home country, and an angel warned Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the child Jesus and flee to Egypt for asylum, because Herod was coming to search for the child. So they fled to Egypt, as scripture said in Hosea the prophet, *“Out of Egypt I have*

called my son". When King Herod heard that the wise men had tricked him he went into a rage, and sent his soldiers to massacre all the children of Bethlehem under the age of two, fulfilling the prophet Jeremiah 31, "*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children, she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*" When Herod finally died, the holy family could return from Egypt where they had lived as refugees. But Herod's son Archelaus was on the throne, who was almost as cruel as Herod, so Joseph and Mary made a new home in a town called Nazareth, where the child Jesus could grow up in safety from despots and kings in the nation's capitol.

So here is the conflict between the two visions of kingship from the scriptures themselves, as identified by Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. It is a tale of two prophets, Isaiah and Micah, both appearing in Matthew's story, and of two cities: Jerusalem and Bethlehem. In Isaiah 60, royalty from all nations come to Jerusalem on camels, bringing gifts for Israel's new king as tribute: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Because God promised that God is still with God's people, who will shine like a light in the darkness as a beacon to the world of Yahweh's presence and power. That was the promise and hope, which never actually happened. But Matthew saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise, and the three Magi were the proof that "kings from the Gentile nations" would come bearing gifts. Isaiah's prophecy would support the "establishment royal house" in Jerusalem, that saw legitimacy and political power as the end that justifies the means, that would even imprison and kill prophets, critics and children in order to stay in power (or betray their country). Even King Herod liked *this* prophecy, but then he was troubled and confused when those wise men came on camels looking for a newborn king. Herod knew nothing about it! So we see how Herod consulted his biblical expert researchers, to give him the inside scoop.

The scribes quoted not Isaiah, but Micah, looking for a new king to come NOT from Jerusalem, but from Bethlehem, the city of King David. Not from the halls and city of power and intrigue, but from the birthplace of a shepherd, a rural, dusty little town. Micah was a commoner, from a small village, who focused on the corruptions and pretensions of the capitol with critical eyes. He even saw the fall of Jerusalem differently – as an outsider – and said to Jerusalem in chapter 5, verse 1: "*Now you are walled around with a wall; a siege is laid against us; with a rod they strike the ruler of Israel upon the cheek.*" Then in verse 2 we read: "*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*" (Micah 5:2)

So this is the shift: this new king (the Messiah) will bring a different kind of rule. As we read in Psalm 72, this one will *rule your people righteously and the poor with justice; let him defend the needy among the people, rescue the poor, and*

crush the oppressor...May the kings of Tarshish pay tribute, and the kings of Sheba offer gifts....For the King delivers the poor who cry out in distress, the oppressed, and those who have no helper. He has compassion on the lowly and poor, and preserves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their lives, and precious is their blood in his sight."

So instead of the pretensions and "triumph" of a king who receives tribute from other nations, we see an alternative in innocence and hope for the people of God. Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem, and Brueggemann emphasizes this new direction, the detour the three magi took to go there instead. They "resisted Herod's evil" by taking a long detour home, around Jerusalem to Persia, circumventing the king's desire. Herod didn't kill the Messiah, but he still had blood on his hands: those of the children of Bethlehem.

So Matthew tells the story of this child Jesus, who grew up to preach a Sermon on the Mount, not on the steps of the palace of Jerusalem, but on a hill outside its walls. When Jesus said "*Blessed be the poor...blessed are those who mourn....blessed are the meek, the hungry, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.*" Jesus says to us, and all who follow him, "*You are the light of the world....So let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.*" In the end, on the last day, the Day of Judgment, we hear in Matthew 25 Jesus say, "*Come you that are blessed by my Father, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*" This is a blessing for those of humble circumstances, who have suffered and assisted those experiencing suffering, not merely for those born into royal families or living in palaces.

These words from Jesus in scripture guide us today as we follow him. They give warning to the Herods in our world, and those who give them allegiance. Our allegiance isn't to the halls of political power in our nation's capitol, but to our risen Lord Jesus, who is present with us and lives in our hearts through faith. King Herods aren't relegated to ancient days – there are murderous regimes that kill innocent men, women and children in our world today. Thousands of children are detained today in America, separated from their parents, in camps on our southern border. Like the innkeeper in Bethlehem, we can give shelter to homeless families, and sanctuary to those seeking asylum. Like the wise men, we can resist our own government's policies that seek to detain or deport our neighbors, the ones who roof our houses, clean our businesses, pick our vegetables, cook our food, care for our elders, and go to school with our children.

For we are to be called resisters of evil, protectors of families, peacemakers, children of God, followers of Jesus. When we follow him on his path, we seek

God's truth as our guide, following a star that leads us home by a different route. The way includes being vulnerable, generous, good neighbors, resisting evil for good, setting aside hate for love, seeking not revenge but reconciliation with our neighbors. So we lift our prayers to God for strength and faith to travel *this* path which leads to the true light, and gives life to the world.