Pastor Sue Westhorp
Address for: Epiphany
Preached: January 11, 2025

Going Home Another Way

Bible reference for sermon: Matthew 2:1-12

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Today's gospel reading is such a great story isn't it?

Full of colourful characters AND it's got camels – what more do you need?

Matthew's story is full of movement—journeys across borders, anxious meetings in palaces, Scripture searched and quoted, fear and joy colliding. Yet at the centre of all this motion is a still point: a child. The child does not travel. The child does not argue or threaten. The child does not summon armies or advisers. The child simply is. Everything else in the story turns around him.

So, today I'm going to try to cut through centuries of sentimentality and distraction and talk about all of the things that are not the focus of the Epiphany story. And then finally – the thing that is the focus.

Epiphany is not just about the magi themselves. They are fascinating, to be sure. We sing about them. We dress children up as them. We imagine camels crossing desert sands under a velvet sky. We argue about whether they were kings or astrologers, Persians or Babylonians, three or twelve. All of that is interesting, and none of it is the point. Matthew does not even tell us how many there were. He does not give them names or describe their clothing. The tradition has done that work for us—sometimes beautifully, sometimes distractingly.

What matters about the magi is not who they are but what they do. They seek. They journey. They risk misunderstanding. They cross borders—geographical, religious, and

cultural. And when they finally encounter the child, they kneel. Epiphany is not a celebration of spiritual elites or ancient wisdom traditions. It is not a reward for getting theology exactly right. The magi get things wrong along the way—spectacularly wrong, in fact, when they wander straight into Herod's palace and ask about a newborn king. Epiphany is not about admiring the magi; it is about being encouraged by their willingness to move, to risk, and to respond.

Nor is Epiphany just about the star. The star has had a long career. It has been analysed by astronomers and theologians, explained as a comet, a supernova, a planetary conjunction, or dismissed altogether as legend. It has been romanticised into a cosmic GPS, "westward leading, still proceeding." But Matthew is not trying to give us an astronomy lesson. He is doing theology. The star matters not because of what it was, but because of what it did. It revealed. It guided. It disrupted settled expectations. It drew outsiders into the story of Israel's God.

The star is a sign that without divine revelation, we would miss the Messiah altogether. We would walk past him, overlook him, explain him away. Especially in a culture saturated with noise, consumption, and spectacle, we need something to interrupt us—to say, "Look again. Not there. Look here." In that sense, the star is not an end in itself. It is a guidepost, a traffic light, a temporary gift. And notice this: once the magi find the child, the star disappears from the story. It has done its job. Epiphany is not about clinging to signs forever; it is about allowing signs to lead us to truth—and then letting them go.

This becomes even clearer when we notice where the star does not lead. The magi quite reasonably go first to Jerusalem. If a king has been born, surely he will be found in the capital, near the palace, surrounded by advisers and guards. That is how the kingdoms of this world work. But Jerusalem is troubled, and Herod is terrified. Herod's fear makes perfect sense. He is king of the Roman Empire, ruling by violence, surveillance, and ruthless self-preservation. History tells us he was quite capable of killing his own children to protect his throne. A rumour of a rival king—especially one confirmed by Scripture and recognised by foreign dignitaries—is an existential threat.

Herod responds as tyrants always do. He gathers allies. He deploys experts. He manipulates information. He lies. He turns seekers into spies. Allies. Spies. Lies. And, soon enough, infanticide. This is not just ancient history. We recognise these strategies.

We see them in our own time, whenever power feels threatened and responds by hardening borders, dehumanising the vulnerable, and silencing inconvenient truths. Epiphany does not reveal a God who endorses such power.

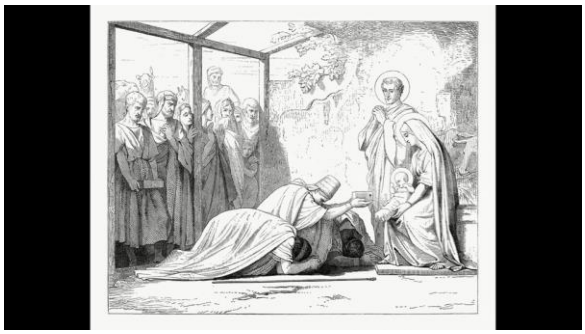
Instead, the story turns away from Jerusalem and toward Bethlehem.

At the centre of Epiphany is a vulnerable child, born not in a palace but in a small village; not welcomed by rulers but sought by strangers; not protected by power but endangered by it. Matthew bends the weight of Israel's Scriptures—Micah, Samuel, Isaiah, the story of Moses—toward this moment to say: this is the Messiah. This is what God's kingship looks like.

And the revelation is breathtaking in its scope. The first to recognise this king are not priests or scribes, but Gentiles—foreigners, outsiders, stargazers, and dreamers. People from beyond the boundaries of Israel's faith and identity. Matthew begins and ends this story with strangers. The Gospel itself will end the same way, with a commission to all nations. From the very start, God's grace spills across borders.

As Australian christians—shaped by migration, marked by First Nations history, and wrestling with questions of belonging and exclusion—this matters deeply. God's revelation does not stay safely within familiar cultural or religious lines. It arrives from the margins. It surprises us. It invites us to journey alongside those who are not "from these parts."

When the magi finally reach the child, Matthew invites us to notice something easily missed. They do not begin by offering gold, frankincense, and myrrh. First, they kneel. The Greek word Matthew uses, proskyneō, means to prostrate oneself, to give total allegiance, to place one's whole self at another's feet. This is not polite admiration. It is embodied surrender. Only after this act of homage do they open their treasures.



The order matters. Worship comes before gifts. Relationship before resources. Self-giving before gift-giving. In a consumer culture—even in church—we can be tempted to reverse this order. We give money, time, or effort and imagine that this is the heart of discipleship. Epiphany asks a deeper question: to whom do we truly bow? Where does our ultimate allegiance lie? The magi's greatest gift is not gold, incense, or myrrh. Their first gift—the gift that makes all the others meaningful—is themselves. What is ours?

The story ends not with a triumphant procession, but with quiet resistance. Warned in a dream, the magi refuse to cooperate with Herod. They do not report back. They do not play along. They go home by another way. It is a small act, and it changes nothing immediately. Herod still unleashes violence. Innocent children still die. The holy family still becomes refugees. We cannot pretend that God's reign arrives without cost or conflict. The clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world is real, painful, and unresolved.

Yet even here, Matthew is already pointing us forward. The myrrh offered at the child's feet whispers of burial. The title "king of the Jews" will one day be written above his head on a cross. The powers that fear him now will conspire again, and this child—whose life begins under threat—will grow into a man who refuses violence, forgives enemies, and entrusts himself to God even unto death. His kingship will be revealed not through domination, but through self-giving love; not by taking lives, but by laying down his own for the life of the world. In his death and resurrection, God will expose the emptiness of tyrannical power and enact a redemption deeper than fear, sin, or death itself.

And still, the "other way" matters. The magi's refusal to return to Herod foreshadows the way of the cross—a way that resists evil without becoming it, that trusts God's future even when the present is costly. How might we be called to resist evil? Who are the vulnerable that we are being called to protect? How can we give voice to the voiceless? Epiphany does not give us a map, but it does give us a direction shaped by the crucified and risen Christ.

And finally, the star fades. The magi do not need it anymore. What once guided them from the outside now burns within them. They leave with enflamed hearts and illumined memories. They have seen something they cannot unsee. That is how revelation works. Signs are temporary. Truth endures.

We, too, are invited to follow the star—not to cling forever to the sign, but to let it lead us to Christ. To kneel. To worship. To be changed. And then to walk another way through the world, bearing within us the light of the One who has redeemed us by love and who goes ahead of us even through death into life. Epiphany is a promise: God is here, whether or not we notice the signs. And God-with-us continues to be revealed—in the stranger, the hungry, the outcast, the vulnerable Christ among us.

So may we have the courage to seek, the humility to kneel, and the faithfulness to go home another way. And behold—God is with us. Always. Amen.

Video of the service including the above address can be found on the St Paul's Lutheran Church Youtube page https://www.youtube.com/@stpaulslutheranchurchboxhi1133