

Following the Path of Light

Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Ah, the story of the beloved wise men. Three kings, robed in splendor, kneeling reverently beside a manger. Shepherds nearby. Angels hovering just out of view. Mary and Joseph gazing lovingly at the baby Jesus while the star of Bethlehem shines brightly overhead, perfectly placed—almost like a spotlight—on the holy scene. This is the image most of us know. It's the image printed on Christmas cards, reenacted in church pageants, and frozen in porcelain and wood in the nativity scenes we set up in our homes. It's the picture that comes to mind every time we sing the familiar carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," which we will sing together in just a few moments.

But here's the thing. **There is something not quite right with this picture.** Because when we slow down and take a careful look at the biblical text itself—when we read Matthew's story closely—we discover that much of what we imagine has very little to do with what is actually written.

They aren't called kings.

The number three is never mentioned.

They don't visit a manger but a house.

And the star doesn't hover politely over a stable like a divine GPS marker.

Our image of the magi has been shaped more by centuries of church tradition, art, and song than by Scripture itself. And that doesn't mean the tradition is bad—but it does mean it can sometimes obscure the deeper meaning of the story. If the Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s was about anything, it was about returning to the text itself—about separating what Scripture actually says from what tradition has added on. **The story of the magi has a lot of layers that need to be gently stripped away. Not so the story becomes smaller. But so it becomes truer. And therefore more powerful.**

Matthew includes this story—and only Matthew includes it—for very specific reasons. **First**, Matthew wants to make clear that the birth of Jesus fulfills ancient Hebrew hopes and prophecies. This child belongs within the long story of Israel. Jesus is not a spiritual accident or a cosmic afterthought. He is deeply rooted in a sacred lineage.

Second—and this is where the story begins to disrupt our assumptions—the magi come "from the East." Most scholars believe this means Persia. They are astrologers. They study the stars. They interpret dreams. They practice a spiritual discipline that would have been viewed with deep suspicion by faithful Jews. They are pagans. Gentiles. Outsiders. And yet—they are the ones who notice the star. **They are the ones who discern that something holy is unfolding.** They are the ones who set out on a costly, dangerous journey. They are the ones who bow down in reverence.

Matthew is making a radical theological claim: God's self-revelation is not limited to one nation, one religion, or one approved way of knowing. If only Christian Nationalists would recognize this. Biblical commentator Richard Donovan puts it this way:

Epiphany challenges us to abandon our tribalism—racially, nationally, denominationally—and to expand our tents...to welcome even those whom we would prefer not to love.

Or as John Pavlovitz would say, to build a bigger table. Matthew insists that **the boundaries we draw between us and them do not determine where God is present.** God's light spills over our categories. God's grace refuses our gatekeeping. God's love travels farther than we expect.

The **third** reason Matthew tells this story is to place the discernment of the magi directly alongside the response of **King Herod**. And the contrast could not be more stark. Herod is powerful. Herod is connected. Herod has religious experts at his disposal. Yet when he hears of the child who has been born, he is "frightened"—and so is all of Jerusalem with him. **Fear is his first response.** The magi, by contrast, respond with curiosity. With attentiveness. With wonder. The irony is striking. **The outsiders recognize God's movement. The insider feels threatened by it. This is not just ancient history. This is a pattern that repeats itself across time.**

Those who cling tightly to power often perceive God's movement as a threat. Fear hardens into defensiveness. Defensiveness turns into aggression. And aggression justifies harm. Herod's discernment is shaped by self-preservation. The magi's discernment is shaped by trust. **Herod asks, "How do I protect what I have?" The magi ask, "What is God inviting us to follow?"** And Matthew makes sure we see where each path leads. Herod's fear leads to violence. The magi's discernment leads to transformation.

This story is called an epiphany because it reveals something essential about God—and about us. The Greek word **epiphaneia means manifestation. An appearing. A revealing. An epiphany is an "aha" moment. A sudden clarity. An unexpected illumination. And here's where discernment becomes central. Discernment is not about certainty. It is not about having everything figured out. It is about learning how to recognize which light is worth following in a world filled with competing lights.**

The magi, like ourselves, lived in a world of many lights. The light of empire. The light of religious authority. The light of political power. The light of cultural certainty. Yet they chose to follow a star that led them away from the centers of control and toward vulnerability. Away from palaces. Toward a child. Away from Herod. Toward Jesus.

Discernment always involves choosing. Which voice will you trust? Which path will you take? Which light will you follow? So let me ask you this morning: **What stars are you following right now? What shapes your decisions?** Fear—or hope? Habit—or holy curiosity? The desire to stay safe—or the courage to be changed?

Over years of spiritual practice, I've learned something important: people experience God's Presence in many different ways. The way I discern God's leading may not be the way you discern it. And that's not a problem. That's a gift. **The challenge is not how we discern—but whether we are willing to do the slow, humble, courageous work of discernment at all.**

Christine Valters Paintner offers a beautiful reflection on this story, framing it as a guide for spiritual discernment. In her article, "Follow the Star: Spiritual Practices for the New Year," she names six practices, and I want to spend a brief time with each one—not as instructions, but as invitations.

First: **Follow the star to where it leads.** Discernment begins with attention. What keeps shimmering at the edge of your awareness? What longing, question, or practice keeps drawing you forward? Not every star is worth following. Some lights distract. Some deceive. Discernment asks us to notice which light draws us toward love, justice, and deeper compassion.

Second: **Embark on the journey, however long or difficult.** Herod gathers information but never moves. The magi move. Discernment is not passive. It requires embodiment. Participation. Risk. It cannot be delegated. Where are you tempted to let others do the journey for you? Where might God be inviting you to take a step of your own?

Third: **Open yourself to wonder along the way.** Matthew tells us the magi were “overjoyed at seeing the star.” Cynicism is the enemy of discernment. Wonder softens the heart. It keeps us open to surprise. What practices restore your sense of wonder? What helps you remember that God is not finished yet?

Fourth: **Bow down at holy encounters in messy places.** The magi encounter holiness not in a polished sanctuary, but in an ordinary home. Discernment often reveals God’s Presence where we least expect it—amid imperfection, vulnerability, and struggle. Are there places in your life you’ve dismissed as too messy for God? What if that’s exactly where holiness is waiting?

Fifth: **Carry your treasures—and give them away freely.** Discernment is never just about what we receive. It’s about what we release. The magi offer their gifts without conditions. What gifts are you being called to share more freely? Your time? Your voice? Your compassion?

And finally: **Go home by another way.** After any true epiphany, there is no going back unchanged. The old path may no longer fit. The familiar route may feel restricting. Discernment often leads us into new directions we did not anticipate. Epiphany reminds us that God is still revealing God’s self. Stars still appear. Dreams still interrupt. Paths still diverge.

The question is not whether God is speaking.

**The question is whether we are willing to listen—
to discern—
and to follow.**

Follow the Light.

Amen.

Resource:
Richard Donovan
Christine Valters Paintner
Chatgpt