

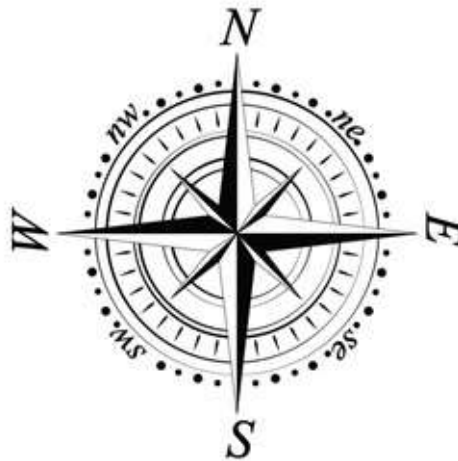
January 7, 2018
First Sunday of Epiphany

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Guided”

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Isaiah 60:1–6

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1–12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶And 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.' "

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Guided”
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Most of us are probably aware that Albert Einstein was a physicist who pioneered the theory of relativity and came up with that famous equation, $E=mc^2$. While I was in seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, Einstein’s mythology took on a whole new dimension, so to speak, since the house where he lived while he worked at the Institute for Advanced Studies is a landmark near the seminary campus. But recently, reading a biography of Einstein, it quickly became clear to me that I really didn’t know a thing about Einstein as a person. It turns out; he showed few signs of genius as a child, even as a young adult. He graduated college near the bottom of his class and it took him years to find a job at a university where he actually got paid to teach and research and refine his ideas. He married and then went through a bitter divorce after he began an affair with a first cousin. He had a child out of wedlock whom he never even laid eyes on.¹ Most of us think of Einstein only as the mythological genius who transformed our understanding of space and time, but it turns out Einstein was also utterly human, as flawed as you and me.

Reading this biography while preparing for a sermon about the magi, it occurred to me that something similar has happened to us with this biblical story.

These magi have assumed a status of mythical proportions. Think of all of the details that have been added to this sparse account over the years, details extolled in stories, hymns, and art. Here are a few of things, none of which are found in Matthew’s account, that most of us now take for granted about the magi:

- there were three of them
- they were men
- they were wise
- they were kings
- they rode camels

At the risk of rendering all of our nativity scenes, not to mention our pageant, inaccurate, the fact is that none of these details are in the text. The text refers to “magi,” a Greek word from which we get the word “magician”; and states that

¹ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*. Simon and Schuster, 2007.

they came from the east, and that the star they saw in the sky leads them, not to an obscure stable in Bethlehem but to Herod's palace in Jerusalem. They were, after all, looking for a king. From Jerusalem, Herod and his chief priests and scribes send these visitors to Bethlehem. Once the magi are back on the road, the star reappears and leads them what must have been the most unlikely king they could have imagined.

Having finally reached the end of a long and arduous journey, the magi discover something utterly unexpected and more than a little disturbing: not the royal family they anticipated, but a poor, newborn baby boy and his unremarkable, peasant parents surrounded by animals in a dusty stable.

Einstein had an unusual way of coming up with his theories. He had an incredible imagination and an extraordinary ability to conduct thought experiments; to imagine, for example, what it might be like to ride alongside a beam of light or to accelerate through deep space in a closed box, like an elevator. Through such thought experiments, he would intuit certain principles and properties of space and time and light and matter, but often it would take years for Einstein and his contemporaries to put mathematical formulas to his ideas. And there were many times along the way that Einstein would go down paths that turned out to be total dead ends. Other times, he refused, at least at first, to follow the paths indicated by his experiments, because they went in the exact *opposite* direction that he would have expected based on centuries of accepted scientific principles. Einstein's discoveries ultimately required us to rethink many of these principles, including the foundations of Newtonian physics and Euclidian geometry.

When the magi first saw the unique star that heralded the birth of a new king, they thought they knew what they would find when they followed it. From their knowledge of astrology and prophecy, they determined that this star heralded the birth of a new king. So they assumed, as we usually do, that, following it, they would be led to something, to someone that fit their current understanding of births and kings, not to a backwater town, a crowded stable, and a manger serving as a cradle. Surely this is why they brought gifts so completely inappropriate for a baby: gold for royalty, frankincense for religious ceremonies, and myrrh, which was used to prepare

corpses for burial.² What kind of visitor to a new baby brings a gift better suited to a funeral? Can you imagine someone showing up to a baby shower with an urn?

But whether they knew it or not, myrrh might just have been the most appropriate gift of all for a baby who was God incarnate, the divine in human flesh. For what is more human than death? What reveals more the extraordinary nature of this divine birth than the fact that Jesus, as the hymn puts it, was “born to die”? But imagine Mary putting these gifts on Jesus’s bookshelf so that he would see them every day of his childhood and adolescence and young adulthood. Could it be these strange gifts served for Jesus as a kind of guide, just as the star was for the magi, just as a star word can be for us throughout the coming year? And if so, how might these gifts, symbolizing royalty, divinity, and death, how might they have reminded him who he was and to whom he belonged? How might they have guided him on his journey from the manger to the cross?

The poet T.S. Eliot is among those who have taken liberties in imagining and embellishing the story of the magi. In his poem, “The Journey of the Magi” he recounts the journey from the perspective of one of the magi, now an old man, looking back on an experience that changed his life forever. It’s not a pleasant recollection, for the magi recall a difficult journey:

*“‘A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.’...
the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.*

He recalls finally arriving at a strange and unexpected place – just in time for the birth. In the rest of the poem it becomes evident that this journey and its destination

² Kevin D. Williamson, “‘This Thing Which Came to Pass’,” *National Review*, Dec. 24, 2015.
<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/428980/christmas-scenes-strange-families>

changed this man's life forever, so that once he got back home, things were never the same again. And as he looks back now, he wonders, was it a birth they saw, or was it a death?

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods."*³

Birth is always accompanied by death. Transformation is always an experience of death. Something must die to make way for what is new. When we have experienced birth of any kind, we cannot return to the places we came from without feeling that we no longer belong in the way we once did.

I hope that when the kids passed out star words today, you took one.⁴ Hopefully you have some understanding of what that word means and how it might apply to your life. But I predict that over the next year, something will happen as you ponder this word, something not unlike what happened to the magi as they followed their star and took a long and arduous journey and then found themselves in the last place they expected, on their knees, worshiping a most unusual king, overwhelmed with joy by the love of a God they didn't know existed.

Last year, when we gave out star words, I put mine on a shelf above my desk, where I saw it nearly every day. The word was "perseverance," and I had a pretty good idea what that meant for me when I first got it, but my year took some unexpected detours, as most years do, and along the way that word took

³ T. S. Eliot, from [Collected Poems, 1909-1962](http://www.davidlose.net/2013/01/journey-of-the-magi/). Found in David Lose's blog post, "Journey of the Magi," Jan. 5, 2013, <http://www.davidlose.net/2013/01/journey-of-the-magi/>

⁴ If you weren't in worship on January 7, please contact the church office to receive a star word: covenant@covenantweb.org or 216-421-0482.

on new meaning. It resonated in my life in ways I could not have predicted, and eventually, it became a sign, not so much of my perseverance, but God's, God's persistent presence, God's relentless capacity to be with me through all kinds of challenges.

This word became a reminder that knowing *how* things are going to turn out, that knowing how the journey ends isn't the most important thing. What matters more is knowing, and remembering, who we are and to whom we belong. After Einstein's theory of general relativity was proven by measurements taken during a rare solar eclipse, the New York Times' headline read:

"Lights All Askew in the Heavens;
Men of Science More or Less Agog Over Results of Eclipse Observations;
Stars Not Where They Seemed or Were Calculated to be,
BUT Nobody Need Worry."

Your life, your relationships, your journey of faith – for that matter, our whole broken world chances are, none of them are what they seemed or were calculated to be. The equations we thought were reliable theoretical predictors have a tendency to break down when put into practice. What we thought was a birth might contain a kernel of death and what we thought was death might turn out to hold a seed of new life.

But nobody need worry, for the child whose birth is at the heart of this story – who is at the heart of all of our stories both guides us and goes with us. We are guided by our loving God, who will stop at nothing to reveal God's love and care, who uses the most unlikely elements of our lives to lead us in this journey. It is a journey of transformation and discovery and astonishing surprises, a journey on which we might just learn that death is not the worst thing and that love, the most persistent and powerful force in all God's universe, both cradles and guides us all.

Amen.