



Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 7, 2024

"Where? Returning by Another Route"

Rev. Eyde Mabanglo

INTRO TO SCRIPTURE

Christmas break is coming to a close and a familiar refrain around my home this week has been, "I'm bored." Then I realized that I live alone, so I must be the one saying it.

I remember my dad musing about when my twin sister and I would come up to him on a long, dark afternoon and say, "we don't have anyone to play with." He thought it was hilarious—we naturally did not.

He would offer to play Hide-n-Go Seek. He would say, "Go hide and I will try to find you." My sister and I hurried off to find a closet or cupboard to hide in....or we would go under the stairs or even into the laundry shoot. Five minutes turned in to Ten. Ten into Twenty. And soon our game would come to an end with the sound of my father's snoring from his well-used burgundy recliner ...in the living room ...in our huge, dark, lonely house.

Hiding, seeking presumes questing, searching. It requires one to ask, "where?" Where!

In today's Scripture passage, Herod asks, "where?" The wiseman ask, "where?"

You and I—as good followers of Christ, should also ask, "where?"

And when we find what we are looking for, we experience what some have called an Epiphany.

The Epiphany, called Theophany in the East, celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, and this is done in the story of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. Epiphany is celebrated on January 6.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGE

Matthew 2:1-12—**Visitors from the East**

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! ¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Lord Jesus
may your light shine our way,
as once it guided the steps of the magi:
that we too may be led into your presence
and worship you,
the Word of the Father,
the King of nations,
the Saviour of mankind;
to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

~ *Frank Colquhoun*

**We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts we traverse afar
Field and fountain, moor and mountain
Following yonder star**

Let me begin with a critique of the old familiar carol, "We Three Kings"—The song makes us think about these men's kingdoms, their origin, it makes us think about why there are only three. In this old hymn, we've gone back to the story and assigned meaning to each of these extravagant gifts that they have brought. We wonder what brings them, learned men that they are to the manger and the lowly state of the now-recognized Holy family. We three? A first-person plural autobiographical account in an old Christmas carol, but now preserved in a canon of traditional carols passed on to our young to learn and be confused by and for the older generation to repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy of the songs that they employ.

But as we camp out with these men of obvious good fortune, we enjoy their shiny clothes, their braided beards, their elf shoes, and the fragrance of their gifts - forever grateful that frankincense can cover the stench of frankly foul-smelling camels. When we say 'We' as in We Three Kings, let us dare say "We" as us with them, seeking, searching, indeed questing for Truth. We can and should relate much more to them as wisemen - truth-seekers, scholars, academics, curious Georges not King Georges, who have been led by a mysterious star that lit the night skies and their

curiosities... and challenged their understanding and so they responded to its bidding in order to learn the Truth behind its presence. We can aptly conclude that the sender of the star uses many languages to bid men to follow.

**O Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright**

We are one of them and they are of us. Wise men.

SO, these men are not kings. Although they are familiar perhaps with kingly ways. They may have riches, but they are not themselves rich as kings, but what they are rich in is their insatiable need to know truth. And their questions about the star set them on a quest that they knew innately that they could not afford—to miss.

Not We Three Kings, but We More-than Three, many persons or sojourners traveling from a far with other truth seekers, for what else would one want or need to search but for Truth—reality—purpose—The Logos—The Word—Divine Revelation—the sender of a star—God. Do you see how much we are like the wisemen...or is it a stretch for you this morning? Maybe, you agree that we can relate to the motif of traveling throughout our lives. You get the journey part. Yes. You might even agree that you have dedicated year after year to the star. We admire the star. We adore the star. We draw the star. We sing about the star. We love the star, but can we really say that we have dedicated our lives to following the star? Are we asking, “where?” or is five years turning into ten, ten into twenty, and soon our lives are over when we hear our father snoring in his recliner in a dark, lonely, boring house...

Where? This question should shake us this morning. Where? ...because if we are truthful about the status of our search for truth, we have been anything but wise men—for the only act of these men that made them wise is in their following the star...and asking, “Where?”...all the way on their quest until it ended—as ours will also end—with a child.

The message of these wisemen—indeed any truly wise man, is to follow all the way to Bethlehem, all the way to Galilee, all the way to Calvary, all the

way up that hill, all the way to the cross, all the way to true Epiphany. The star bids each of us to follow. Jesus bids us to follow. True wisemen follow the star and they follow the one who sent the star.

The star then reminds us of the role of our churches. Beacons on a hill. A witness. Something that bids people to ask about its sender. A light in the darkness. May we as His church always remain shining above where the child lay.

Westward leading, still proceeding Guide us to thy Perfect Light

The carol, "We Three Kings" distracts us with the need to examine the crowns or look for the receipts from the gifts the Three bring. When we remove the mis-named king language from these Magi /wisemen /scholars, we then can see past their meaningless, fairy-tale regalia, their camel blazers, their lama-zines, and the baa-baa bling on their sheep and finally see that the story is indeed about kingship! Kingship. BUT Not their kingship, but True kingship. King of the Jews kingship. King of all peoples king-ship. King of all Kings kingship!

In the ancient language, Messiah means Last-Time King. My prayer for each of us today is that Jesus will be your Last-Time king. In the wisemen's search for Truth they consulted many authorities—land maps, star charts, astrology, astronomy, dark arts, magic, and yes even the Hebrew Scriptures. God's revelation in nature brought them part way, and God's revelation in Scripture brought them to Jesus. No matter what King people are seeking, they will eventually have to behold the Last Time King. We must learn from these curious colleagues to not fear science or the records of other men's discoveries as ultimately a true search for Truth will find ultimate truth. And we know that all Truth is found in the infant born king.

This is just as true today as it was then. Time and again God's voice tells us to not fear for he is with us. No more could this be true than in the incarnation of his very self. We need not fear when we find the last time King ...and then follow him.

Herod, however, is a fearful man. He absolutely understands the absolute nature of a true king to the Jews. He is threatened. His reign is threatened because he knows that he is a fraud—a fake—a self-made king. How does a self-made king stand against one who is born king? News of a true child king disturbs him because his own advanced age and vulnerable kingship cannot withstand a young anointed child called the Messiah—the last time king. The king of the Jews—the king of all kings. He wants to seek the Christ child, but not as a wise man, but as a coward. He wants to find the king to finish him, not follow him. For he understands perhaps better than anyone in our story that if the true king emerges then he—in the prime of his reign—at the pinnacle of his enthronement—would be in a word: finished.

Our Heroes today are More than Two Wisemen, not Three Kings. In their wisdom they resisted the tyranny and self-absorbed ambition of Herod. In their wisdom they listened to and followed a divine warning to go home another way. They chose Christ to be their king, not Herod. They bowed before Christ, not Herod. Christ is their King, not Herod. Again, we travel with these wisemen even today trying to remain true to and follow the last time king of Jesus the Christ...while resisting the powers that are enthroned in our own worlds, because if we are truth seekers, our last time king has warned us of making other things and other men our kings. The last time king knows that there is still a king Herod in our world competing for the throne of our hearts—to rule there—Herod represents the human default of every man—the constant pull of the ego to be the King Herod of our own life. Jesus says that you cannot serve two masters, you cannot be Herod in your heart and still call me your Lord. In other words, you can't hate others and love God. In other, other words: You can't praise me with slander on your lips. The last time king says pick one... and follow.

And this is where we stand with our fellow wisemen—in the midst of all of our knowledge, our charts, our money, our gifts, our pedigree, our accomplishments, our lama spit, our camel dung, and our meaningless regalia we must answer him. It is time for us to respond to the end of the quest of every question. When Jesus asks us to follow him, we must answer, "where Lord?".

There will always be a battle for kingship within our hearts. The story of the wisemen contains messages that are as global as God's promise of peace and renewal—a message meant for all peoples of all lands...or as minute as the need for every man to lay his gifts at the base of a humble child as an act of awe and true worship. But most importantly it is a story about what it means to be wise...and how to find a king for our hearts.

Born a King on Bethlehem's plain
Gold I bring to crown Him again
King forever, ceasing never
Over us all to reign.

May it be so,

