Christmas is now clearly in your rear view mirror.

Everybody knows the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas*, right? “On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree.” If you add all the gifts in the song, it totals a whopping 364 gifts. If you buy all these gifts for your true love, PNC Wealth Management estimates it will cost you $107,300, up six percent from last year. Eight maids a milking will still cost you $58 since the minimum wage remains unchanged, but seven swans a swimming will set you back $7000.

Today is the last of the 12 days of Christmas, called Epiphany Sunday in the church. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning appearance. It’s the day when Christians commemorate the appearance of the Magi to worship the Christ child.

Christmas is now clearly in your rear view mirror. Many of you have taken down your decorations and put them back in the box for another year. Some of you are still holding out, planning to keep the tree trimmed until Valentine’s Day.

The carol we sang earlier, “We Three Kings,” erroneously identifies these Magi as kings. There is no Biblical warrant that these Magi were kings. Their connection to kings is likely the result of Old Testament passages in Psalms and Isaiah, which speaks of a universal ruler who will receive gifts from kings of distant lands. The 6th century tradition goes so far as to assign the Magi names—Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. We have no idea of their number. Most likely three is chosen on account of their threefold gift of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

These Magi don’t make it to the manger. Our crèche sets may come complete with Magi, but Matthew tells us specifically, in verse 11, that these Magi arrive at the house to present their gifts. It would have taken them at least a few months to reach Bethlehem from the Orient.

What we do know about these Magi is that they are astronomers from Persia, in what may be Iran today. They are highly educated scientists, who study the stars for a living. That’s why they are sometimes called Wise Men. They make it their business to interpret future events from the stars. These ancients believed that the sudden appearance of a new star or constellation could serve as a harbinger of a coming king.
It’s unclear what astrological sign heralds the coming of this new king. It could be the appearance of a new star or supernova. The conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC could have created such illumination. There were also several comets streaking across the ancient sky in 4 BC.

This new star leads the Magi to believe that a new king was to be born. Since they don’t know where to start, they travel to Jerusalem to ask King Herod about it. There are a total of five Herods mentioned in the Bible. The one mentioned in Matthew’s gospel is Herod the Great, who was pathologically suspicious of people. Get this—he executes his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, three sons and his wife, because he is paranoid about them wanting to depose him as king. He reigns over Israel 40 BC-4 BC. In 37 BC, the Roman Senate bestowed on him the title, “King of the Jews.”

So, when the Magi ask Herod, in verse 2, “Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?”, you can bet this annoys Herod. He summons his advisors to inquire where this new king will be born. They tell him, “In Bethlehem of Judea,” for this is what the prophet Micah has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel” (Matthew 2:5-6).

Herod calls a secret meeting with these Magi. I have learned through the years never to trust secret meetings. Do everything in the open. Herod feigns interest in worshipping this new king, but the Magi can see right through it.

They take off for Bethlehem, following the star to the house where Jesus and his parents reside. When they see this child with his mother, Mary, they are beside themselves with joy. They offer gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts are highly symbolic—gold to express his royalty, frankincense to acknowledge his divinity and myrrh to foreshadow his redemptive suffering. As poor peasants, Mary and Joseph have never seen so much bling.

These Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Matthew records, “They return to their home by another way” (Matthew 2:12). This is the last we hear of these Magi.

It’s curious to me that two groups who visit this new king, shepherds and Magi, are outsiders. Shepherds rank near the bottom of the social ladder. Shepherding is considered a menial job for the laboring class. The Magi are foreigners; they’re Gentiles, not Jews. They’re not believers; most likely they practice the ancient philosophy of Zoroastrianism. This cannot be coincidental. God welcomes the worship and gifts of people everywhere.
The irony in this story is unmistakable. These Magi travel a considerable distance over rugged terrain to get to Bethlehem. Yet, here we have Herod and 72 of his select religious advisors, with full access to the history and tradition of the Scriptures, who miss it entirely. This Messiah is born right in their backyard, yet they miss it altogether. How telling.

I’ve never cared much for reading poetry. Maybe I was impatient with its mystery or suspicious that poetry seems too high-brow and elitist. But as I age and experience the messiness of life, I’m drawn to poetry as a medium to express deeper sentiments that prose doesn’t always communicate.

I was drawn this week to a poem by T.S. Eliot entitled Journey of the Magi. Eliot is the most celebrated poet of the 20th century, who came to prominence during the 1st World War. His poetry from those years, especially his poem Waste Land, expresses his deep disillusionment with the human condition. Eliot’s ability to give voice to this despair made him famous. Yet, his life was as empty as the images in his poetry. He was an atheist or, at best, an agnostic, who lived in a world that seemed to him devoid of meaning.

Yet, something was stirring in Eliot. He traveled to Rome in 1926 and visited Michelangelo’s sculpture of the Pieta, which displays Mary at the foot of the cross cradling her dead son in her arms. Suddenly, without warning, before family and tourists alike, Eliot dropped to his knees at the sight of it all.

He went home and suddenly immersed himself in Christian writers. The following year, Eliot was baptized into the Christian faith. A new sense of meaning and hope began to infiltrate his poetry.

Journey of the Magi was the first poem Eliot composed after his conversion. On the surface, it’s a story about these Magi. Underneath, it’s a poignant description of Eliot’s spiritual journey.

Eliot begins his poem by describing the difficult journey these Magi take in the dead of winter. Their journey is made harder by poignant memories of luxuries left behind: the summer palaces and “the silken girls bringing sherbet.” Along the way, these travelers encounter hostility from those who consider their enterprise to be a total waste of time.

Yet, our travelers press on and finally arrive at their destination. The birth they come to experience is real and life-changing. Yet, what’s ironic about this birth is that it feels surprisingly like death. Eliot asks, “Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?” Even though Eliot is a new Christ follower, he already sees, with penetrating insight, into the nature of faith. He recognizes early on that some things will
Today, I’m crossing the line. I’m going God’s way.

have to die if this new life is to come alive within him.

Eliot concludes the poem with these words:

“We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.”

Eliot understands that nothing will ever be quite the same again. His former manner of life is no longer relevant and his old pleasures no longer satisfy. This is how the greatest poet of the 20th century describes his spiritual journey. He does so by retracing the journey made by Persian astronomers 2000 years ago.

The story of T.S. Eliot and the Magi could be our story. We start out on this journey because we see his star and have decided to follow him. But we soon discover this Christian journey becomes hard and tedious. There are some along the way who mock our journey, telling us such pursuit is a waste of time. We wonder ourselves, at times, whether it would be easier to turn back. The challenge is especially acute at this season of the year, in the dead of winter, to borrow Eliot’s words, when Christmas is past and the routine of job and school and daily living press in on us again. It was so much easier at Christmas to put this stuff on hold.

On Christmas Eve, I challenged members and guests alike to arrange our lives this year to give Jesus Christ greater priority. I’m inviting you this month—in January 2013—to make good on your resolution to follow Christ.

There are people available to talk with you about your intentions in the hall after worship. There are classes available for you. Let me tell you, there are classes: one that meets tonight, another on Tuesday night for women, and several next Sunday morning as well as a men’s group that resumes a week from Monday. I learned yesterday of a class that will be offered three times this month on helping people read the Bible. We stress the Bible so much because meditating on Scripture is God’s way of forming Christ in us. Our goal, as we’ve said before, is to help you create a spiritual growth plan.

What is it going to take for you to say, that’s it. Today, I’m crossing the line. I’m going God’s way. I’m going to do it this year! I invite you to enter into communion by praying and thinking about how you will arrange your life this year to give priority to Jesus Christ.