

Message: “Where is the One?”¹

Did they know? Lying face down on the floor, tears flowing from their tired eyes, muscles aching from a journey covering too many miles and too many worlds, hearts pounding from a longing too deep to define. Did the magi know? As they gazed at the child, held by a mother way too young for this responsibility, this gift, did they know?

Or did they only hope? In the silence, between falling to the floor and rising to open their treasures and offer their gifts, blood roaring in their ears, it’s easy to imagine the magi retracing the steps of their journey. From the euphoria they felt sighting the celestial event, to the decision to go where it called them to go, to the painfully slow plodding steps of the camels across miles of rock and sand, it seemed to take forever, as though they’d never arrive at the place they needed to find. Maybe it was frustration which caused them to detour to Jerusalem.

That stop never made much sense. They stopped to ask directions, of all things. They’d traveled miles and miles following a star with unerring accuracy, and now, for some reason, they stopped in Jerusalem to ask directions. Maybe their assumptions kicked in and they couldn’t imagine such a birth taking place anywhere but in the seat of power. Maybe their lack of political understanding led them to believe the current king would be celebrating this birth with as much enthusiasm as they would. Maybe they rode through the mean streets of the big city and were startled to find no party breaking out, no decor hanging from the balconies, no sellers lining the streets with royal baby-themed souvenirs spilling from carts and wagons. Nothing worth celebrating seemed to be going on anywhere.

So, they decided to ask. Their accents and entourage drew attention to them as outsiders, but their questions on kings and heirs made them dangerous, targets of a suspicious king serving at the pleasure of Rome. So, they found themselves in Herod’s receiving room, where the despot was quizzing them about their quest. Maybe they gave him their answers with the innocence of true believers, maybe they were there to shake things up, maybe they caught scent of his fear and machinations and

¹ Material adapted from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/god-of-the-dark-and-the-light/new-years-day-year-a-lectionary-planning-notes/new-years-day-year-a-preaching-notes>

held back. When he sent them off to Bethlehem with empty promises, they left with their heads spinning and their hearts pounding.

Maybe it was because of their doubts about Herod and the wisdom of involving the powers-that-be in the quest for hope and salvation which caused them to look again. Maybe they lost sight of the star for a time, which caused them to wander off course, and their unsettling encounter with a tyrant desperate to keep his grip on power made them look for direction elsewhere. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with relief and a little bit of embarrassment.

So they climbed on their camels and high-tailed it out of Jerusalem, barely exchanging a word or a glance at one another as they rode all the way to the front door of a little nondescript house. The house couldn't be any more different from the one they just left; as plain as the other was opulent, as vulnerable as the other was fortified. Had they stopped long enough to think about it, their questions would have returned; their doubts surfaced.

Instead, they leapt from their weary camels who were clumsily choosing this spot to finally lie down, because if no one else did, the beasts of burden knew they'd reached their destination. These wise ones barely paused to knock before spilling into the room, startling the young mother feeding a child who always seemed hungry. Then, to make things even more confusing, they fell down on the floor offering praise.

When they rose from the floor before a confused and bewildered girl, they thrust gifts richer than she had ever seen, let alone could hope to own, into her hands. Then with their hearts in their throats, they asked if they could hold him. With trembling hands, they took the offered child and felt his warmth, smelled his breath and wept tears they couldn't explain. Later, they left, blinking at the light still showering glory down on them. No, they thought, not on them, on him. The child. This singular, yet seemingly ordinary child.

Did they know as they made their way home on another unfamiliar road? Any road would have been unfamiliar because the whole world changed with this one encounter, with an act of worship, an offering of

treasures and themselves. Did they speak to one another as they rode, comparing impressions, sharing visions and dreams, asking questions?

Did they dare to ask their questions? Of course they did. They could see it in the child. He was one for questions. He would grow to be asked more questions than anyone before or since. And he would answer them all. With truth. Truth sometimes hard to take, often hard to understand, and always needed to be meditated on, claimed, lived into. Or else it wouldn't be the truth we need.

What we don't know about the magi could fill whole encyclopedias. Oh, we've made up stuff because we don't like mystery all that much. We've given them history, given them names, given them a story so we can wrap our minds around them a little more comfortably. We've constructed scenarios which make sense, sound nice, and fit into the narrative we've created for ourselves.

But Matthew doesn't care about all of that. They're a plot device, a means to an end. The wise ones don't matter to Matthew. Except as a way of announcing his birth. They're a sign pointing to something beyond themselves. Someone gives them meaning and purpose, someone makes them characters in the story, someone defines them. They are who they are and who they have come to be because of what they found. Who they found.

Did they know? Do we? Or is faith enough? Is hope enough? Can we live without knowing, taking the glimpses we've been privileged to receive as crumbs on our ongoing journey of faith?

If you look up the word "epiphany" in the dictionary, you find a Christian festival remembering the manifestation of the Christ to the persons of the magi, or an appearance, especially of a deity. You also find someone else. What was said and done gives us a glimpse, a revelation, an intuitive perception into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, commonplace occurrence or experience, like a stumbling upon someone we didn't expect.

Not knowing, as much as grasping. Maybe that's enough to get us through. To keep our feet moving. To make our commitments, make a covenant. Maybe it's enough to give our lives away to this child, this

story, and this truth. Maybe it's enough. Why not take the chance and find out? Embrace the truth of who Jesus is. You'll be glad.

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.