

# North Kildonan United Church

7<sup>th</sup> January 2024 ~Rev. Susan Reed

## “New Year, New Roads, New Possibilities”

Isaiah 60: 1-6

Matthew 2: 1-12

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Let us pray:

*O God, stir among us as together, we reflect on these words of scripture. Open our hearts and minds to what you might be saying to us through these words, and to what you might be calling us to do and be. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Today, we celebrate Epiphany, and as we enter into the story of Epiphany, we encounter the magi, the wise men. I often say that I wish we had more than one Sunday to focus on this story, which is so rich with imagery. And really, we could take more than one Sunday, but for many reasons, we usually don't.

Sometimes, we might imagine that all of the characters of the Nativity story were crammed together into the stable – Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, animals of many kinds, shepherds with their sheep, and three kings, wearing crowns and bearing gifts, arriving with their camels. I don't think there is anything wrong with this imagining, but scripture does tell us a bit of a different story, with different details than we sometimes imagine. The story of the magi – the wise men – appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. And the details are relatively few. Wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem seeking the child. Scripture doesn't tell us how many wise men, what their names were, where they were from, how far they had travelled, whether or not they knew each other prior to their journey to Bethlehem, or what exactly their occupation or role might have been. We sometimes call them kings and imagine them powerful men. The Greek word magos (the plural form of magi) means astrologer or magician. And given that they observed the star at its rising and knew something of what that star meant, we often conclude that the magi were likely astrologers – men who were used to studying the skies for changes, and for signs of something new.

What scripture does tell us is that these men came to Jerusalem from somewhere to the East, and they came seeking a child, *the* child whose birth was told in the stars. They asked where the child was, and we don't know who they asked, but word of their asking reached Herod the king. And it's putting it a little bit lightly to say that King Herod was not happy hearing about the possibility of another King. King Herod arranged to meet with the wise men in a secret meeting, and sought to manipulate and trick them into getting the information he wanted, and ultimately, the child he wanted to destroy.

After this secret meeting, the wise men set out again, and, we are told, “there ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.” We sometimes imagine that the wise men visited a newborn baby in the place of his birth. Scripture tells us that they entered a house to see the child, not a

stable, and scholars believe the baby was likely more of a toddler than an infant by the time the wise men arrived. Even with details different than those we sometimes imagine, it is clear that the beauty and awe and wonder which were present on the night of Jesus' birth were present again here. We are told that when the wise men saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They entered the house, saw the child with Mary his mother, knelt down and paid him homage. Then, they opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts – gold, which represents wealth and might be a gift for a king... frankincense, which represents worship and might be a gift for a priest or faith leader... and myrrh, which was used as a spice for healing, and also in preparing bodies for burial, which might represent Jesus' life, as his story continued to unfold.

Just as the story of Jesus' birth seems to contain surprises and elements of the unexpected, so too does this story of the visit from the wise men. Two stories central to our faith – although one perhaps told more often than the other – and two stories that tell us of the surprising and unexpected ways of God. First, the Messiah – the long-awaited and long-promised one comes as a tiny, helpless child, born to humble people in a lowly place. Then, the good news of his birth is announced first to the shepherds – not exactly the elite or powerful or privileged or well-regarded ones of their society. And now, in today's passage, the child has some mysterious visitors – perhaps kings, perhaps astrologers who watched the stars, but definitely foreigners. People of other places and even other faiths and traditions and beliefs, who were drawn by the light to undertake a significant journey. Twice, Jesus is revealed to outsiders – first outsiders in their own society – the shepherds, and then literal outsiders – men from other lands – the magi. In both cases, they chose to go on a journey of discovery, they had an encounter with the Christ Child, and they were moved to respond with worship and praise.

Sometimes, we are of the belief consciously or subconsciously that outsiders – those within and beyond our circles, our society, our culture – need to become like us, or more like us. In this case, perhaps the invitation is for us to become more like these so-called outsiders – more like the shepherds and the wise ones. I really strongly believe that everyone has gifts and wisdom to share, and that we can learn a great deal from each other. The experience of my life has been that I have learned the most from people the most unlike me. It is from those of different traditions, different cultures, different beliefs, different personalities, different generations, different worldviews, and different lived realities that I have learned the most.

And so this morning, we have a story of people seemingly unlike us. But people whose journey and story has not only become part of our story, and a powerful example and reminder of how God works in the world, but also becomes an example of discipleship and faithful living.

It happens so often that God's story takes what we know or believe or expect and turns it upside down, or as I like to say, maybe right-side up. God turns the tables... flips the script. And today's story is no exception. Society might tell us that the outsider is the

one of whom we should be suspicious and wary. And in this morning's story, it is indeed an insider who takes on that role, and becomes the one of whom we should be suspicious and wary. King Herod had a reputation for being harsh and violent. This morning's story tells of Herod's jealousy and fear, and further stories to this one tell us how Herod's jealousy and fear were lived out – in unthinkably violent and tragic ways – through what we sometimes too casually call 'the slaughter of the innocents.' Children ordered to be killed in response to Herod's fears and power-hungry ways. And, of course, this response from Herod and warning from God in another dream to Joseph, prompted the holy family to flee, to escape to Egypt until Herod was no longer a threat. This year, this part of the story feels different, as we hear of violence in the Holy Land which has claimed the lives of so many children, and violence in so many parts of our world that forces people to flee in terror, to live lives as refugees. This too, is part of our sacred story.

Despite and amidst the heaviness of that part of the story, there is still so much for us to hold on to from this account of the visit of the magi. Here are some of the things I think we learn from the story of the wise men:

- ~the importance of journeying to find the Christ Child

- ~the importance of offering our gifts to the Christ Child

  - \*gold – our wealth

  - \*frankincense – our worship

  - \*myrrh – our whole selves – joy and pain, wholeness and brokenness

- ~how an encounter with the Christ Child can change us and set us on another path; send us home a different way

- ~and, how scripture is clear that God's story is not just for a select few or for a chosen people; that the story of God revealed in Jesus is for everyone – even the Wise Men... even gentiles... even us.

The story also features a star, which was the light and the sign which the magi followed to find the Christ Child. I often think of that star as a really bright and really obvious sign in the sky, hanging low over the place where Jesus was. But I read one commentary this week which made an interesting suggestion that perhaps the star wasn't quite so obvious, because had it been huge and clearly visible as something new in the sky, surely Herod and his astrologers would have been able to locate it as well, once the wise men told Herod that was the sign they were following. That commentary suggested perhaps the star was more subtle, and could be seen by the wise men, because they were watching carefully, and studying the sky for changes. This reminds us that sometimes the signs of God's presence and God's work in the world are big and obvious, and sometimes they are more subtle, and found especially when we are intentional in looking for them.

We have entered into a new year, and while starting a new year certainly doesn't erase the past, it does present us with a new beginning of sorts. So as we enter into this new year, full of potential and possibility, I hope that we – like the wise men – might be open

to looking for and seeking out signs of God's presence in our midst and in our world. And I hope that we might be bold in travelling new roads – as the wise men did – at God's leading.

As we reflect on the stories of Epiphany, as we reflect on what is left of our Christmas celebrations, and as we move beyond the Christmas season into what is next – a time of epiphanies, revelations, manifestations and prophecies realized, I'd like to conclude with a poem called "Bright Star," written by Andrew King. He writes:

*And where have you gone, bright star,  
you that shone like an invitation,  
like a beckoning, like a summoning,  
like a signal of something beginning;*

*where have you gone in the nighttime,  
in the distances of murky darkness  
that hides from our eyes the suffering,  
the weeping, the praying, the struggling,  
our eyes grown weary with watching  
for signs of God coming to bless?*

*We have looked for you again in our hoping,  
we have searched for you in our wandering...*

*Could it be, bright star, that we are looking  
in wrong places, in the wrong direction,  
that you are found no longer in the heavens,  
no more in dark meadows of sky,  
but instead you rise on horizons  
of love's possibilities within us –*

*and that we can be the shining signal  
for which others are hoping and seeking,  
that we can be the radiant beacon  
that is a sign of God's presence and caring,  
that we can invite the wanderers  
toward a warm place of welcome,  
as we share with them the journey  
that leads to God's joyful kingdom...*

*Love's light, bright star within us,  
will you rise in our hearts today?*

Amen.