

*God of all Creation, who led the magi to Jesus by the light of a star, accept our worship this morning. And then direct us in the path that you have laid out for us, so that we may share the good news of your love for everyone, no exceptions. Amen.*

January 6, 2019 – Matthew 2:1-12

### **“A Different Path”**

There’s no reason to think there were just three of them, simply because they brought three gifts. And even though nativity scenes include them at the manger on the evening of the birth of Jesus, it’s more likely they arrived several years later. And they weren’t royalty; they were magi, which is a term that means “Zoroastrian priests.”

Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions that are still active today. Going back some 5000-6000 years, it’s older than Judaism, and thousands of years older than Islam or Christianity. The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism was Zoroaster. And Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at the age of 30 after he defeated all Satan’s temptations. He predicted that “other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded.” And Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior.

So with that as background, let’s enter this morning’s text in which some priests had been following a star for 800 miles or more from somewhere in Persia to the town of Bethlehem. It was a journey that took them through the city of Jerusalem, at which point they made some disastrous errors in judgment which would cost the lives of the male infants of Bethlehem and would compel the Holy Family to make their escape to Egypt.

The magi had been doing just fine following the star until they got to Jerusalem. And that’s when they seemed to lose their way. That’s where they stopped trusting the path that had been laid out for them and they decided to ask around for directions.

Each of us has a path to follow. A unique path. A path which has been laid out for us by God. The birth of Christ was directly revealed to the shepherds by angels. It was revealed to the scribes through scripture. And for the magi, it was revealed through the stars. Christ is revealed to each of us in ways that work for us and our circumstances. It’s important to understand that there is more than one path. And we need to trust in the path that has been laid out before us.

The magi seemed to lose faith in their path when they stopped to ask directions from Herod, of all people! Herod was a ruler with an identity crisis. He was not a Jew, but was someone whose ancestors had converted to Judaism. And he knew from the chief priests and teachers of the law that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea, with King David as his ancestor. Clearly, Herod didn’t meet the criteria.

And so when the magi asked this paranoid ruler with an identity crisis, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” that was probably the very worst thing they could have done. In fact, we read, “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.”

Why would their appearance in the city and their quest for the birth of a baby have set off waves of panic? Well, it helps to know that many scholars believe the magi would have come from the Parthian Empire, which was the most enduring of the empires of the ancient Near East, and which made it an enemy of the Roman Empire. The job of Herod and his successors was to guard the frontiers on Rome’s behalf against the Parthian Empire. And so who comes sauntering into town? But some folks who were clearly enemy spies! Which led to fear-based misinformation that quickly spread throughout the city.

LGBTQ folks know a whole lot about fear-based misinformation. This is what fueled the recently passed Oklahoma law that will allow adoption agencies to not only discriminate against same-

sex couples, but non-Christians and single parents, as well. Fear-based misinformation is what undergirds the promise of Republican Texas lawmakers that they will continue to pursue the passage of laws that prohibit transgender people from using the bathroom that matches their gender identity. And fear-based misinformation is what causes evangelical Christians to see folks like you and me as misguided at best, and as the enemy at worst. We are seen as subversives, intent upon undermining the Christian faith.

And that's how the magi would have been viewed by Herod and the citizens of Jerusalem: as enemy subversives, intent upon undermining the power of the Empire.

But in time, the magi seemed to get back on track. After their less-than-hospitable reception at Jerusalem, they continued on their way. They returned to the path which had brought them this far. Matthew's Gospel tells us, "They set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising."

Sometimes we lose our way. We lose faith in the path that God has set before us. We begin to listen to other folks, and maybe even believe what they have to say. But it's never too late to resume our journey, to pick up where we left off. It's never too late to refocus on the guiding star that goes before us. The light that leads us to Jesus, the revelation and incarnation of God's love.

As our story goes, the magi arrived at the home of Jesus and they offered him gifts of honor. Three gifts are recorded in scripture: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But there was another one. It was the gift of themselves. We're told that even before unwrapping their presents, they "knelt down and paid him homage." They worshiped Jesus. When they finally encountered the revelation of God in the form of the baby Jesus, they offered themselves up and worshiped him.

Don't ever let anyone tell you what you need to do or refrain from doing in order to take your place at the table. Don't ever listen to what others say about you. Trust in God's love for you. Trust the path that has been laid out before you. And when you finally arrive at the assurance of that love, you will know peace. You will be transformed. Because that's what God's love does when we encounter it. It transforms us.

The story closes with the following words: "They left for their own country by another road." They avoided the road that had taken them through Jerusalem. They came to understand that that road wasn't for them. Theirs was a different path.

My friends, so are yours and mine. The First Epistle of Peter identifies us as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called us out of darkness into God's marvelous light." It goes on to say, "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10)

If there is any scripture that more aptly describes LGBT Christians, I don't know what it would be. Like the magi, we have been looked on with fear and suspicion. We have been marginalized by many folks who claim to be part of God's inner circle. But in truth, we are "God's own people, called out of darkness into God's marvelous light."

May we answer that call. May we trust in the path that God has laid out before us and stay focused on the guiding star that leads us to Jesus, the very incarnation of God's love. And may we know the peace and joy that comes when we encounter that love. Amen.