

Sermon Text – Sunday, January 5, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6; 2nd Reading: Ephesians 3:1-12
Scripture for Message: Matthew 2:1-15 “Detours”**

What is Epiphany? We celebrate Epiphany as the revealing of the glory of the newborn Savior to the Magi who followed the light of a star. Our scripture readings speak to us of a light that has come and of a people no longer living in darkness. But this light did not come like light comes to us in this modern age – it isn't like flicking a switch that illuminates the whole heavens with mega-kilowatt flood lights. The revealing that is Epiphany is not like that, the light Isaiah speaks of was the slow gradual glow of daylight after darkness or like the slowly growing brightness of our Advent Candle wreath as a new candle was lit each week – a building brightness that led to the manifestation of a divine being – the infant Jesus. The star the Magi followed was a gradual revealing that led them to the place where they would find the infant king. For us to appreciate the impact of Epiphany we need to take a detour from what we usually hear in Jesus' birth stories.

The star the Magi followed was not so bright to cause them to need sunglasses, they didn't need the “black-out” glasses we used during last year's Solar Eclipse. The light from the star they followed was just enough to grab their attention, a unique glimmer in the sky that led them to something quite unexpected – a glory that had nothing in common with the aura we perceive surrounding our movie or sports stars. They followed a star that slowly illuminated their lives until they came to witness the glory of the lord as a child playing with his mother. They worshipped this child and presented the gifts that they had prepared to a king. Those gifts, Frankincense, typically burned in the temple offerings to God represents Jesus' deity. Myrrh, a substance used for embalming and preparing the deceased for burial foreshadows Jesus' death. Gold, although much needed by this family for their future “detours,” is a gift fit only for a king – I wonder if they specifically planned these gifts for those reasons or if the significance to us is coincidental.

What we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians celebrates the inclusion of Gentiles within the family of God. A detour from what the Jewish people expected proclaiming that bringing non-Jews into the people of God is the culmination of an eternal divine plan. This inclusion began with a star that revealed a mystery. The Magi were not Jews, yet they knew the prophecies, they believed the prophets, they listened for and waited for the fulfillment of the prophecies. These “wise men” were prepared for an Epiphany, so they followed a star that let them to worship a king who had just entered the world as a baby. Paul writes to the Ephesians, “through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made

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known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This began at Jesus’ birth heralded by angels and by a star that the Magi followed.

Seeking a king, these three “kings” came first to Herod’s palace to inquire the whereabouts of the one who has been born king of the Jews. This news greatly disturbed Herod. The news of a baby king and the fulfillment of ancient prophecy was a direct threat to his own power. The Magi had to detour from the palace of the King to the little humble town of Bethlehem to find the one true king and when they found him, they saw a child playing with his mother. Nevertheless, they recognized the one they sought, and they worshiped.

There was, however, one more detour for the Magi – a vision in a dream warned them of the threat Herod posed to this little infant king, so they chose to return to their country by another route. These men, probably soothsayers or seers, fortune tellers or magicians, traveled a great distance for possibly nine months or more to follow a star not really knowing what they would find when they reached the end of their journey. Now, because of Herod’s paranoia and because of the Spirit moving within them, the Magi had to detour on their journey. The magi, wisemen from the east, traveled west toward the center of Roman power and oppression, but after seeing the Christ child and receiving a warning in a dream they detoured around the powerful and chose a different route home.

They were not of the nation of Israel, ancient scriptures promised that a Messiah would come but the Messiah would come to Israel. These men had no reason to travel other than to satisfy a curiosity that the knowledge of the prophecies would bring to them. Maybe that is why we call them wise men because they figured out what the priests and rulers of Israel at the time could not. It’s interesting to me that Herod was of the nation of Israel, he was Jewish, yet he knew little of the prophecies and relied on Gentiles, in addition to his own priests and teachers, to inform him of what the people of his ancestry believed and waited for.

That, however, isn’t the end of the detours; Joseph received a warning in a dream not long after the Magi’s visit. The dream warned of Herod’s intent to find the child and murder him. Joseph gathered his family and fled to Egypt where the Holy family remained until it was safe to return. They could not, however, return to Bethlehem, there was another detour for them, and they returned to Nazareth in the region of Galilee. Matthew tells us all this was a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies – prophecies that tell us the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem but would be a Nazarene. These detours worked to accomplish God’s plan.

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This story we read from Matthew’s Gospel is a detour from the Nativity story in Luke’s Gospel. The two stories are quite different, Matthew does not mention the shepherds, or the Holy Family traveling to Bethlehem on a donkey. Matthew does not mention the Manger or there being no room in the inn. Luke does not mention the Magi or the gifts they bring. When you mesh the two versions together you get what we now celebrate in the Christmas season. We have absolutely no way of knowing which “story” is true to the actual events and it doesn’t really matter, there is a message in both Matthew’s and Luke’s story that we can apply to life in the twenty-first century. A message that might bring us to a detour and bring us to imitate the Magi’s journey.

In an Epiphany message Pope Francis said, “It is not enough to know that Jesus was born, like Herod, if we do not encounter him. When his place becomes our place, when his time becomes our time, when his person becomes our life, then the prophecies come to fulfillment in us. Then Jesus is born within us. He becomes the living God for me. Today we are asked to imitate the Magi. They do not debate; they set out. They do not stop to look but enter the house of Jesus. They do not put themselves at the center but bow down before the One who is the center.”

The words we read from the book of Isaiah also describe a detour. The Lord says through Isaiah to the nation of Israel, “Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the hip.” This describes a turning around of those divided, a turning around of nations. Isaiah’s words describe restoration and reconciliation, and the revelation of God’s glory in a light so bright kings will turn toward it. In that light, redemption tears down the weak structures of injustice, falsehood, and deceit. Coupled with the proclamation from Psalms 72, our call to worship this morning, we hear the message of justice and righteousness.

Detours are prevalent in our Christmas and Epiphany readings. The unexpected detours are what accomplish God’s ultimate plan for the world. There is a lesson in this to us that “God is available to all and is found along unexpected paths, including paths that we wouldn’t have taken or that make us uncomfortable.”¹ Think about the times in your lives when your plans had to be changed, when you had to take detours. Hopefully, it does not happen too often but sometimes when we face potential detours those changes in our plans bring something better to our lives. I can tell stories from my own life when plans went awry, things happened that at the time were painful or difficult to manage but as the light dawned on a new day, my life was better for the experience.

¹ Lisa A Smith. “In the Lectionary: January 6 Epiphany of the Lord” *The Christian Century* vol 142, No 1. January 2025. p. 24

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Detours bring us to moments of discernment and opportunities for growth. That I think is what the Magi experienced in their detours, moments to discern the meaning and significance of what they sought and the moment of awe when they discovered where the star brought them. Detours too allowed Mary and Joseph moments of discernment and moments where absolute trust in God's promises was essential to the wellbeing of their little family.

We too experience a detour in this season. A new year is upon us, we have watched and waited for the arrival of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have come through the experience of Christmas and now have reached the time of celebrating epiphany. Epiphany is about the grand expectations that will come after the long-awaited visitor has arrived. Detours remind us that sometimes we must be open to novel resources for revelation or enlightenment. Detours that come in the form of dreams, or stars, or advice from children and words of hope from unexpected places.

We will experience detours throughout our life's journeys. Detours that might take us to unfamiliar places and might take us to places we have no desire to visit. God's plan continues to be a mystery to us and God's power manifests in ways we do not expect and are sometimes unusual. As a church and as believers and followers of Christ we must be open to the subtle dawning of God's light in our world. God's light that illuminates the darkness revealing places where we most need God's grace and creating the detours that help to accomplish God's will and ultimate plan. We are part of that plan, this church and each of us as followers of Christ have a part to play.

As a church we must keep our eyes open to where God's light is even now illuminating the darkness. Places where different ethnic and or religious groups can come together and turn their hearts toward God in unity. Where Christian, Jewish, and Muslim can together worship the one true God, the God of all creation. The star that the Magi followed was not a Jewish star, and I'll bet it was a star visible to more than just the wisemen from the east. The fact that only the wisemen from the east were the ones to travel into unknown territories and make the detours necessary for the divine revelation they found at the end of their journey is telling. God's light is available to everyone who will seek and follow – despite the detours they will find along the way.