

So the first time I went to Edinburgh in Scotland, I was in college, and I went with some friends. But one particular day, I just kind of went around and was sightseeing on my own, and I ended up down at Holyrood House, which is the palace in Edinburgh. It's at the bottom of the Royal Mile. The castle is way up at the top of this hill. And then Holyrood House is down at the bottom of the Royal Mile. And I was touring it. It's this seat of power, and it was definitely a site of some political drama. It was where Mary, Queen of Scots, stayed when she was in Edinburgh. And one such dramatic incident that happened in Holyrood House is her husband, Lord Darnley, one night burst into her supper room and dragged out her personal secretary, David Rizzio, and proceeded to stab him more than 50 times in front of his pregnant queen. Then, less than a year later, Lord Darnley himself was mysteriously murdered.

And so I had gone to this place, touring this seat of power, this place that had been fraught with violence. Then I was walking around the gardens outside of Holyrood House, and it sits at the foot of these volcanic crags. And I saw people walking up the side of this one crag. And I thought, "You know what? I kind of would rather go that way now." And so I really hadn't been at Holyrood House for that long, but I decided I was going to take this different path. For the next few hours, I kind of wandered semi-aimlessly up this crag until I finally reached the top, which is called Arthur's Seat. And when I got up there, I could see all of Edinburgh. It had led me to a completely different vantage point. I had a different view of the city because I followed this different path away from this seat of power.

Today we hear a story of wise men who follow a star, first to a seat of power, but then they find themselves on a different path, leading to a whole different vantage point.

Matthew tells us that magi come from the East, following a star. Over the centuries, we've softened them into "three kings" placed neatly in our nativity scenes, which we even sang about this morning. But in actuality, Matthew gives us an image that is much more disruptive. The magi were not actually kings. They were astrologers, scholars of the stars, likely from Persia or Babylon. They were part of an educated priestly class that studied astronomy, dreams, and signs in the heavens.

And here's why that's important: from a Jewish perspective, the magi were religious outsiders. Astrology was not a faithful Jewish practice. They did not belong to Israel's covenant. They did not know the law or the prophets the way the scribes did. They would have been, in the words of my eight year old, "sus."

And yet, they are the ones who notice the light. This is Matthew's first big Epiphany revelation: God's light is not confined to insiders, and God's truth is not limited by borders, traditions, or religious categories. The magi symbolize the nations of the world, Gentiles, being drawn toward God's light. From the very beginning of the Gospel, Matthew is telling us that Jesus is not only Israel's Messiah. He is God's gift to the whole world. This story is a radical unveiling of who God includes.

Today is what we call Epiphany Sunday, where we hear this story of the magi's journey. Epiphany means "to reveal" or "make manifest." In this story, God reveals something new to the magi. The magi don't just see the star and write down observations in their journals. They act on it. They pack up. They travel. They risk being wrong. They risk ridicule. They follow a light that does not come with a map or clear answers.

In doing so, the magi learn something about faith that it is often less about certainty and more about movement - about responding faithfully to the light we are given, even when we don't yet know where it will lead.

Meanwhile, others in the story, those with power and knowledge like Herod, do not follow the light, but do what they can to put it out.

And so the magi arrive in Jerusalem and ask a dangerous question: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” They don’t mean it as a challenge, but it becomes one, because Herod hears that question and is afraid. We talked a lot about Herod last week and his response to the magi’s questions. Herod represents empire: power built on fear, violence, and control. And the light of Christ threatens everything Herod depends on. If a true king is being born, then Herod’s authority is fragile. So Herod schemes. He pretends to be pious. He asks the magi to help him, hoping to turn their search for light into a tool of violence. He wants to manipulate their earnest quest into a way for him to destroy that which threatens his power.

In this story, we observe that the magi, foreigners, see the star and move. The religious leaders, experts in Scripture, know the prophecy of the Messiah, but they stay put, maintaining the status quo. And Herod, king of Judea, responds with fear and cruelty. We see this theme play out again and again in the gospels as God reveals God’s self through Jesus, not in the seats of power, but in the paths less traveled – on the margins and amongst the vulnerable.

Now here is a detail that I had not picked up on in the story before this week. The magi follow the star from the east, and then Herod calls for them. The star does not lead them to Herod. It does not lead them to the seat of power. And then in verse 9, as they leave the palace, it says they set out and there ahead of them, they saw again the star they had seen in the east – as if it wasn’t visible to them while they were with Herod. The light reappears once they leave the palace, and with it, their sense of joy. Sometimes clarity comes not when we stand closest to power, but when we step away from it. Sometimes joy returns when we refuse to let fear dictate our path.

The star leads them away from a throne, and instead to a child. Away from wealth, and instead to poverty – to love made flesh. The magi find Jesus and kneel. They offer gifts. And then they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they go home by another road. This is not just a traveling detail in the story – it is a truth at the heart of Epiphany, which is this: once we encounter Christ, we cannot go back the same way.

Two saints, separated by centuries, help me understand what Matthew means when he says that the magi “went home by another road.”

The first is Polycarp of Smyrna, a second-century bishop. By the time he was arrested, Polycarp was an old man. The Roman authorities did not begin with threats. Instead, they appealed to reason and safety.

All Polycarp had to do was burn a pinch of incense and say, “Caesar is Lord.” It was framed as harmless – just a symbol, just a formality. He could still believe whatever he wanted in his heart. He could go home. But Polycarp understood what empire was really asking for: allegiance. So he answered with words that have echoed through the centuries: “For eighty-six years I have served Christ, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior?” Polycarp refused to return to Herod. He would not give false loyalty, even to save his life.

The second is Maria Skobtsova, often called Mother Maria of Paris. She lived in Nazi-occupied France during World War II. As Jewish families were hunted, disappeared, and deported, many Christians chose silence or convinced themselves that faith was a private matter.

Maria saw something different. She became convinced that Christ was present, truly present, in the suffering neighbor. And if Christ was there, then faith could not remain abstract or safe. So she opened her home to refugees. She fed the hungry. She hid Jewish families. She helped forge documents to save lives. She refused to cooperate with a system built on fear and death. Maria, too, refused to return to Herod.

Both Polycarp and Maria were offered easier roads – roads of safety, silence, and symbolic compromise. Both were told that a small concession would change nothing. And both understood that faithfulness is often tested not in grand gestures, but in the quiet question: Whom will you serve? They did not overthrow empire. They did not wield power. They simply refused to go back the same way once the light had shown them the truth. Like the magi, having seen the light of Christ, they chose another road, and by doing so, they have shown us the way home.

The magi refuse to cooperate with injustice. They choose obedience to God over complicity with violence. Their worship of this different king leads directly to resistance. Faith, the story tells us, is not neutral. Sometimes faithfulness looks like quiet refusal. Sometimes it looks like choosing a different path when the old one leads toward harm.

I love this story of the magi – religious outsiders who get it when the insiders either don't care or actively try to destroy the light of Christ. Religious outsiders who are transformed by Jesus. Epiphany does not end with the magi. It continues with us. Jesus will later say to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "You are the light of the world." Not because we create the light, but because we reflect the light we have received.

In a world shaped by injustice, inequality, violence, and fear, the church is called not to protect power, but to follow light – to be Epiphany people. Epiphany people.

Epiphany people are watchers. We pay attention. We notice where God's light is breaking through in unexpected places and unexpected people, often at the margins, often where the world is hurting most. – again and again I have been reminded of how much light shines through voices from the margins. One of our downtown neighbors, Orville, regularly writes poetry, and I had meant to share this poem last week (with his permission) he wrote during breakfast on Christmas morning last week:

God is God, God is great
It is him and his Son that we should all love, respect, and without a doubt, appreciate
Jesus was a King from the day he was born
So praise his holy name with the angels
And let Gabriel blow his horn
Jesus didn't do a single crime
He just preached and taught about his Father's kingdom all the time.
They put him to his death
But that was not his last breath

He lives now and always

Epiphany people are movers. We do not stay where we are when the light calls us forward. We are willing to change, to risk, to step out of comfort and certainty in order to follow Christ more faithfully.

Epiphany people are discerning. We learn to recognize when power tries to use faith for its own ends. Like the magi, we listen for God's warning voice when a path leads toward harm.

Epiphany people refuse to be complicit with the sins of Empire. We do not return to Herod. We do not cooperate with systems that harm the vulnerable, exploit the poor, or rely on fear to maintain control.

Epiphany people reflect the light. When Jesus says we are the light of the world, it's not because we generate the light, but because we reflect it. We reflect Christ's love in concrete, embodied ways: by telling the truth, by standing with the vulnerable, by choosing courage over comfort, by practicing justice, mercy, and humility

The light of Christ does not make the world safe, but it does make a different world possible. The magi remind us that God often entrusts revelation to outsiders, that power resists or tries to destroy the light, and that encountering Christ always changes the path we take through the world.

So may we be Epiphany people, watching for the light, willing to move, courageous enough to resist injustice, humble enough to kneel at the feet of Jesus, and faithful enough to travel by a different road. Because the light still shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it.