

Drawn to the Light
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Matthew 2:1-12

Mary and Joseph were simple people, who traveled to Bethlehem, the city of David, for the Roman census. Of course, there wasn't a family photo album that documented the trip. They didn't check out their route with trip advisor.

And as the story goes, Mary and Joseph were so humble and unassuming, that even though Mary was about to give birth, they accepted a place in the stable, when there was no room for them in the inn at peak travel season. At least that's what Luke's gospel has to say.

Matthew's gospel gives us another angle in which to view the coming of the Messiah, the story of the Magi's visit.

On the surface, their son's birth wasn't even a blip on the radar of the high and mighty religious and civic leaders in the great city of Jerusalem. No one – not King Herod, not the chief priests and scribes in the temple, not even the shopkeepers in the busy marketplace noticed anything unusual. For the king and his lackeys, it was business as usual.

How did they miss looking up to see the Star in the East? Maybe the holy city was too bright and loud to hear the angels telling the shepherds on a distant hillside, *"Fear not. For unto you is born ... in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."* And it's true, that nothing extraordinary had happened recently or perhaps ever, in the sleepy little town of Bethlehem about six miles away.

So, the Holy City of Jerusalem knew nothing of the birth of a Savior until three mysterious foreigners arrive in town, riding camels and wearing rich and colorful robes, asking dangerous questions. Predictably, King Herod was both startled and frightened by their arrival, and he worked to keep his composure as he called the chief priests and scribes together to ask them what their holy scriptures say.

The learned ones of the Temple did not let the King down. In an inner room their stylus pointers ran down the scrolls, lifting out the scriptural references Herod was seeking. The prophet Micah (5:1-2), named the Messiah's birthplace as Bethlehem, and the prophet Isaiah (60:1-3), wrote, *"Arise, shine, for your light has come ... Nations shall come to your light, and kings*

to the brightness of your dawn." There were others, but the King told them he heard enough as a large pit of anxiety settled in the bottom of his belly.

King Herod told the three visitors that according to their Holy Text the child they sought must have been recently born in near-by Bethlehem. He sent them out to find the child with a blessing through the Jaffa Gate, asking only that they send him information on exactly where he was, so that he too may go and greet the family, to pay his respects and bring a gift of his own.

We know, by reading past this part of the story, that the King has something sinister in mind. He has no interest in worshiping the child, nor in bringing him gifts, not even cheap ones from the Dollar Store. Herod's plan all along was to do away with his new rival, the one whom scripture foretold to be the Messiah and future king. He knew that as long as the child exists, his power and his throne will be in jeopardy.

Most of us don't have the resources on our own to follow a quest like this, to be drawn to the light, like the magi did. When we look at the night sky we might feel insignificant, or a sense of amazement. Gazing upon shooting stars, we may come to believe that we are connected to a larger universe, a bigger story. Just like those ancient travelers, we are made to seek something beyond ourselves.

When the Magi finally reached the child, they were overwhelmed with joy. As planned, they bowed and offered gifts fit for a king. But what inspired the joy, I think, was what they found in Jesus, what they saw: the wisdom of God, in a child not yet two years old.

Herod had worldly power those days, but Jesus had *wisdom* for the ages. There before them was Wisdom Incarnate – wisdom of heaven for these days, a wisdom that understands the future, a wisdom that embraces us all. Grace and love, mercy and peace.

How will the wise ones respond to Jesus? How will this child change them? How will the wisdom of God they found in him affect them? The Magi were overwhelmed with joy, gave glory to God, honored the child, then they did something unexpected – they *left for home by another road*.

Another road. All along, that is where this story has been headed. Will they choose to go back to Jerusalem on Herod's road, following Herod's instructions, doing it Herod's way? Or will they stay drawn to the light and depart Bethlehem on the Jesus Road?

That is what Jesus does to us, introduces us to a different road, invites us onto that path of love and mercy, gives us the wisdom for traveling.

Understand: Here Matthew is introducing a message that will be heard again and again throughout his Gospel. Matthew wants us to know that with the coming of Jesus, we have two ways, two roads, two routes for our living, and we had better choose wisely.

There is the way of this world, and there is God's way we see in Jesus. There is the kingdom of selfish unrighteousness, and there is the kingdom of compassionate righteousness. There is Herod's highway to sin, and violence and raw unchecked power, and there is the Jesus road of love and light.

Bethlehem held three surprises that day: A child with God's wisdom in his very DNA. Joy, magnificent and overwhelming joy! And a dream to travel home by a different road. The wise ones still follow a different route, the Jesus Road, and find in doing so great challenges and great joy.

Which way will you take when you leave this place today?
Will you try to straddle both, like a stunt performer riding two horses, standing with one foot on each ... which works for a while, and then...?
Which way will you honor, trust, and give your gifts to?
Which of these routes is truly wise? Amen.