

Sermon Notes January 6, 2024
Peace Lutheran Church
The Holy Gospel of Luke 2: 1-12
“God's Glory Revealed”

It's tempting to think of these familiar Epiphany texts as a rear-view mirror, allowing one last glimpse of Christmas, but these passages speak of vision and forward mission. They reveal uncomfortable truths, placing the church in front of a fitting-room mirror, suggesting that our current fashion may need updating. These texts challenge religious leaders both then and now.

The text focuses on two sets of characters. First the “Magi” who enter from the east. They are unapologetically foreign astrologers, sign readers, and have no sense of a belief in what they will encounter very soon. Their acts are outside the canon of faith. These visitors contrast with the next character, King Herod, who along with synagogue leaders and learned men, sits at the center of orthodox power.

A star provides the central set-piece, heralding a new king. But who actually sees it? Nowhere in the text do Herod or his followers recognize the star. Only the Magi see it. It's like a new thought ...proving more visionary than church leadership of today might even imagine. Maybe Herod was unaware or simply viewing from the wrong angle. Regardless, the Magi had the truth, while Herod didn't. In the end the Magi give away their wealth while Herod tries to retain his power and position. At the end of the story, the Magi exit gracefully, remembered for their part. Herod goes on to execute every male child in Bethlehem who is under two years old, so that he may retain his primacy.

Churches sometimes wonder about the path they are on. They often will look to “a new method to take the same old path.” Sometimes it works and sometimes it does not. The Magi literally took a different route, and thereby the Christ child changed all roads forever.

When the star comes to rest, it illuminates a new reality: a universe-altering Messiah comes to earth in infant form, born in an outcast town. Events in Bethlehem are not supposed to influence Jerusalem. It should in fact be the other way around. It's just as backward as a God en-fleshed on earth and a baby having more importance than a king and his scholars.

Change has arrived. The heavens are alight with it. How will we react? This question is particularly pressing as churches set as their mission reaching “outsiders,” bringing them into the indoctrinated fold (as did Herod when he attempted the same with the Magi.) Until we're clear about what we value, nobody should accept the invitation of any religious institution.

WE must always be clear and communicate it. The story of the Magi affirms that our neighbors have a relationship with the divine, even if they come from a different place, are young, don't fully agree, or operate outside of our church structure.

Acknowledging that makes up for our lack of perception and limits our power. For us, as for the people in this text, the future is unknown, ill-lit, scary, and disruptive. It remains life-changing and amazing, nonetheless. We are not to fear it. Nor dare we equate knowing with following, or control with correctness. These are Herod's interpretations. We're called instead to be Magi - questioning, witnessing to the light. Giving, following, even when we can't perceive the path. The Magi didn't get to set the mission, define the location, or count the steps, but their faithful uncertain questioning revealed more truth than Herod's palace, power, and prophecy.

Today's readings urge us to get off our self-made thrones, come out from behind the walls, and take a new journey. Isaiah 60 bids God's people to "arise, shine." Psalm 72 speaks of a new king inconceivably great. In Ephesians 3, Paul talks of serving the gospel that unites Gentile "outsiders" with long-standing "insiders."

Traditionalists among us can rejoice that the very thing they have worked for has arrived.

This text is not a callback to a past holiday. It's a living invitation to follow a future still unfolding as wide as the heavens, wrapping its arms around all of us. God's plan!