

Matthew 2:1-12
1/3/16—Epiphany of the Lord C

Psalms 72:1, 5, 7, 10-15a, 17a
Isaiah 60:1-6

Travelers

This is the Sunday before January sixth: according to tradition, the date of the wise men's visit to the Christ Child. So we in the Church are still celebrating the Christmas season—thanks be to God! But in the culture we live in, the Christmas season is over, and the period known as “the holiday season” is winding down. During the past six weeks, since before Thanksgiving, almost every time you turned on the news, you heard a report on how many Americans are traveling. Even as I speak, travelers are making their way back after the New Year holiday. The ones boarding flights today know that air travel isn't as easy as it was a couple of decades ago.

Many others have chosen to drive to their destination. Drivers calculate the time and costs involved in making a trip, considering factors like inclement weather, traffic congestion, and the price of gas. When we're planning a trip in the car, it's all about navigating from point A to point B. What route will we take? How many turns will we have to make? How will we find

our way? Twenty-first century technology does make it easier to get where we're going.

How many of you have a GPS in your vehicle? Those letters stand for Global Positioning System. An electronic device that uses satellites to help you navigate in unfamiliar places. A GPS is pretty handy to have, and usually reliable. You just key in the address of your destination. I'm not a techie, and even I can do it! And the GPS talks to you, tells you whether to bear right or left, tells you where and when to turn. Its voice says "recalculating," if you choose a route different from the way the GPS would take you.

But a GPS wasn't available to the travelers we hear about on this Epiphany Sunday, in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew calls them *māgi*. Wise men. It's believed that they were Zoroastrian priests, experts in the occult. Skilled in dream interpretation, divination, and astrology. Practitioners of the secret arts, who used the stars to foretell future events. There's much about the magi that's shrouded in the mists of time. Much about the magi that we don't know. But one thing we *do* know about them: they were travelers.

The magi see a new star, a star rising in the western sky. And they set out to follow it. The magi travel from a faraway eastern

land, a land that today is Iraq and Iran. They travel—probably—close to six hundred miles. With only the light of a star to guide them, they cross a great desert—an unforgiving landscape—into a foreign country. And into Jerusalem, its capital. Where they encounter Herod.

Toward the end of their long journey. You know, reflecting on the journey of the magi kind of brings to mind your own journey, doesn't it? The journey I mean is a metaphorical journey. The journey, so to speak, that brought you to this place today.

Where did your journey begin? The place where you started out may have been a wonderful place. Or not so much. But you were used to it. You'd grown accustomed to it. You knew what to expect from it. It was familiar, as opposed to being unknown. Unknown territory can be frightening.

But one day—maybe a long time ago—you looked up at the heavens and you were filled with a nameless sense, an awareness that there was something more, something deeper, something greater, something more compelling than anything you had known up to that point. You had to know more. You *had* to go. You couldn't *not* go. And so you set out in search of this something. Or someone.

As you started out, was it dark? Dark like these country roads at night? Where you can see nothing except what's in the beam of your headlights? Or if you're on foot, and the only illumination is starlight? The experience gives you a feeling of insignificance. And, perhaps, of lostness. It's intimidating to walk in darkness.

It's daunting. On your journey, you didn't know where the path was going to take you. Did it fork, leaving you uncertain which way to go? Did it cause you to descend down into a valley of shadows? To trudge—exhausted—up a steep mountainside? Did the path lead you across burning sands under a blazing noonday sun? Or over terrain so rocky and rough that you stumbled again and again? Did obstacles keep you from moving forward? Or the fear of never knowing what was around the next bend?

You've traveled a long and winding road. Your journey's been filled with challenges. It hasn't been easy. But something has kept drawing you. Drawing you powerfully!

Just as the magi were drawn ever-closer to Bethlehem. Did you notice that in their story, God isn't even mentioned? But from beginning to end, we discern God's hand—unobtrusive, yet active—at work behind the scenes. In order to get the magi to the place

God wants them to be, God sets a star in the heavens. God has all manner of ways of getting us human creatures to the place where God wants us to be. And God is not limited in the ways God will accomplish God's mighty purposes.

But the magi don't get to the Christ without first being guided by the Scriptures. Maybe that's one of the things Matthew's telling us in this story of the magi—that if we truly want to meet Christ, we need God's word to get there.

Maybe we need God's word most when we've almost reached our destination. Sometimes that's when we encounter the modern-day Herods that inhabit our own world. When you're tired from a long journey, you may encounter a Herod who feels deeply threatened by the One you're seeking. A Herod who will use any means at his disposal to be rid of the One he knows is more powerful than he. A Herod who demands your loyalty, just as first-century Herod demands the loyalty of the magi.

Even though these travelers are nothing like Herod—or any other Jew, for that matter. The magi are foreigners. They're different. Radically different. They dress differently. Worship differently. Speak differently. Their class and customs and culture

are different as different can be. They're outsiders. They're Gentiles.

That is, I think, why Matthew tells us the story of the magi. Matthew wants us to take a good, close look at them. Matthew wants us to see that even people like us—Gentiles who are not of the chosen people Israel—even outsiders are invited and welcomed by the One we've been seeking. The One who breaks down every barrier and tears down every roadblock that would keep us—and all of God's children—from getting to him.

You've come! You've come into the house. And you're filled with joy. Like the magi who—Matthew tells us—“rejoice with a really, really big joy.” A joy so great that the only possible response is adoration. You just can't help but open your traveling chest and lay before him everything you've carried with you all this time. Your hopes. Your dreams. Your gifts. Your treasure.

You've come to worship him. But will you be the same when you leave? You won't! Like the magi, you've had an epiphany. You've been transformed. You're not the same person you were before. You'll *never* be the same as you were before. So of course you don't go back to Herod. You don't go back the same old way you've been before. You have a different path to travel now.

Jesus asks you today to begin another journey. To travel, like the magi, on another road. A less familiar road. But you won't be alone. You'll have a companion. A guide. Christ goes before you and with you. Christ calls you to depart with him, to follow him on a high and holy adventure.

But before you go, linger with him a while, in this house. Spend some time with him. Gather at his table with your family of faith. There, Christ Jesus meets you. There, he offers you his very self. Food and drink for the journey. Feeding you. Nourishing you. Sustaining you. Filling you.

And when you have been filled, beloved, travel with him down another road. A bright and shining road. A new road. A road that will lead you home.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.