

Rebecca Mattern
January 5, 2025, Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

Will you take a deep breath with me and imagine a bright star shining ahead of you?

The book of Matthew is the first of the Gospels, and its opening genealogy makes a purposeful transition from the Hebrew Scriptures to the scriptures of Jesus.¹ Unlike the story of Jesus' birth in Luke, which we heard throughout Advent and Christmas, Matthew's account of the birth is abbreviated to just 8 verses. Our text this morning comes just after that passage and is only told in Matthew. It spotlights visitors who travel a long way

These visitors we call Wise Men, or Magi, are often represented in our nativity scenes and hymns as three men - a number we get from the three gifts that are named. It is likely though, that there were more than three Magi - and may not have all been men- who would have traveled quite a distance - over weeks or months - in a caravan with animals, servants and supplies.²

Imagine, if you will, the sounds of the caravan: animals breathing, people talking, maybe playing music, and supplies jingling as they travel. As you do, listen for parallels from the Isaiah passage that Bill just read - images of light coming, the Lord arising, hearts thrilling and rejoicing, gold and frankincense.

Hear now the word of God from Matthew 2:1-12:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

¹ Aaron M. Gale, "The Gospel of Matthew" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy Jill-Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 9.

² Paul J. Achtemeier "Matthew 2:1-12, Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Word: Year C Volume 4*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 213.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Word of God for the People of God

Thanks be to God.

I wonder how the magi planned for this trip:

How long did it take to recognize the star was significant?

How long to decide to follow it?

How long did it take to plan out the route, to pack up the caravan?

I wonder, too, how they knew that the star would lead to the “the child who has been born king of the Jews” while Herod, who ruled as king of the Jews, albeit under Roman authority, knew nothing of it?

They would find the king in Jerusalem, the seat of power. Imagine their surprise when instead, he is found in a small village. Did they wonder what kind of king they were guided to pay homage to when they entered the house to see him with his mother? It does not matter, for they are filled with joy and they knelt and humbled themselves and offered generous gifts.

I wonder, too, what they thought about Herod assembling his experts then sending them on their way. Would they have expected him to accompany them? Were they surprised that he was not compelled to follow the star as they were? Did they talk about it on the way to Bethlehem? It seems as though they don't make much of it until they are warned otherwise in a dream and sent home by another road. I bet they hadn't planned for that!

I wonder if you are wondering why I'm so interested in their planning?

Well, it started a year ago - epiphany 2024, when I received my star word. I had forgotten to pick one here during our service and only realized it upon visiting a friend's church. So, I picked one from the middle of a basket there. When I read the word, I rolled my eyes. When I showed it to my friend, she broke out in laughter. The word was plan - and this friend is a planner. She is already planning her travel for 2026! I, on the other hand, am not quite sure of the details of our travel this year! I, in many ways, am not a planner. I can be, but it doesn't come naturally or easily for me. I am much more comfortable with taking things as they come - so the word instantly made me uncomfortable. After all, I had plans to be making and was feeling some pressure from the people around me - and from myself. I thought surely I could practice and get better at it. I really wrestled with what the word means for me, in this time. The star was on my dashboard and literally went with me everywhere. That is, until I was reminded of God's words given to Jeremiah for those who were exiled from Jerusalem: "For I know the plans I have for you ..., plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11) After months of beating myself up, I was released. Released from my self reliance, and from the pressure of figuring it out on my own. I was released to re-focus on God. The star word moved, literally, into my home and has been in a stationary place, without my conscious awareness of it until the telling of this story. My star word has brought me angst but led me to peace - and, I believe, has guided me to this place with you, of shifting my role and providing space for my continued seeking of God's plan for me, even as the APNC does the same for PCO.

I wonder, if you received a star word last year, how it showed up in your life?

We know, as readers of the story today, that while the magi were seeking the star - Herod was plotting destruction out of fear for his own power. The visitors, for whom the foretelling of the scriptures is not part of their tradition, are not seeking this new king out of fear, but out of curiosity. They are not threatened by the power

of this new king, as is Herod, and instead recognize the sign of light from God that this child king was important. They have traveled to recognize the Christ. They are the first to proclaim Jesus as king. They have come to show that Jesus was born for all people, that seeking God in the humbleness of the Christ child moves us away from the darkness of living in fear and plotting destruction and toward recognizing the light of Christ that makes hearts thrill and rejoice, and compels us to humble ourselves and follow.

The visit of the Magi to the child born king of the Jews is a one time story. Our seeking to follow Christ is a lifetime endeavor. Star words are one way to help us focus our seeking, to attend to the ways that God is shining in our midst, illuminating the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives, and asking us to follow.

There are star words placed in the baskets on the stools here in the front. After you have received the communion elements, you are invited to take one and use it as a tool for reflection throughout the year. It helps to put it in a place where you will see it often. If you do not receive one after communion, we will have them available after the service. For those who are joining us online, you can contact Pastor Lisa to receive a Star Word.

Like the star the magi sought, may your star guide you along your path to following the Christ child, and may your seeking bring growth in your relationship with God, yourself, and others.

Amen.