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St. James', Mt. Airy  
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Christmas 2/C  
Jeremiah 31:7-14  
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a  
Matthew 1:1-12

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;  
take our hands and work through them;  
take our hearts and set them on fire.  
Amen.**

Today's Gospel just has so much going on, it's hard to know what to pay attention to.

King Herod and the Temple authorities in Jerusalem, the Magi journeying from the East, a wild star, prophecies, Bethlehem, Mary and her child, paying homage and giving gifts.

And also fright, duplicity, overwhelming joy, and guiding dreams.

Where do we enter in? We're still in the season of Christmas, but with today's story we turn our gaze from the manger and toward the wild star. The arrival of the Magi is celebrated each year on the 13<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas – Epiphany. Translated, Epiphany means manifestation or revealing – and so today perhaps we should begin by asking *what is revealed?*

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At the center of the story is the child Jesus. Everything else – all the action and emotions – revolve around him. So what is revealed through him?

**So much.** Beginning with the hearts of the people orbiting around him.

Herod, frightened by the news that a king has been born who is powerful enough to draw Magi from the east, sent the Magi on their way to Bethlehem. He did not send a delegation, or go to pay homage himself, however. And in fact, after learning from the wise ones the timing of the star's rising, he later sends the order to kill all children under the age of two in Bethlehem – the slaughter of the innocents.

This evokes for us, and not by mistake, the story of Moses and Pharaoh – and indeed Jesus also escapes death, not in a basket in the river, but when Joseph has a dream warning him to flee to Egypt with Mary and the baby.

Herod's heart is revealed as that of a despotic ruler.

The hearts of the Magi those elusive foreigners from the East, are also revealed. There has been a lot of mythos built up around the Magi, but what we do know for sure is that they were drawn to witness to the birth of Jesus and they came to pay him homage.

Pay him homage. It appears three times in this scripture passage. The NRSV translates it from the Greek word *proskynō* not as 'worship,' but as 'pay him homage.' As such it evokes and implies the custom of prostrating oneself at the feet of a king. It is a symbol of the giving of your entire self to another.

And so it is that the hearts of the Magi were revealed when they entered the house and found Mary with the child. The first thing they did was kneel down and pay Jesus homage. Only then did they give the material gifts they brought.

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What else is revealed?

Matthew crafted this story in such a way that the topography – the places – in this tale reveal the fulfillment of prophesy. In this relatively short passage the following texts are quoted or alluded to: Micah 5:2, Samuel 5:2, Numbers 24:17, 1 Kings 10:1-10, Isaiah 60, Psalm 72, and the infancy story of Moses.

So what places born of prophesy do we find in this passage?

***The East.*** The direction from which light dawns. And with the arrival of the Magi from the East, the entrance of the stranger and alien into a story wrapped in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish culture and faith. It is a counterpart to the closing of Matthew's Gospel when the disciples are exhorted to go and make disciples of the nations.

***Jerusalem.*** The center of Jewish faith, the home of the Temple. And also an occupied land with a puppet king where power had come to trump piety. The place where Jesus will one day confront power, which will lead to his execution.

***Bethlehem.*** Within the religious borders of faith, but nowhere of real importance. And yet when Herod called on the chief priests and scribes and asked them where the Messiah was to be born they said, "In Bethlehem of Judah; for so it has been written by the prophet: *And 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.*

***Their own country by another road.*** The story today, and for the Magi, ends when they leave for their own country by another road. We are not told what country it is, or how they were guided home without a star to follow. This place is not a fulfillment of prophesy, per se, and yet I can't help but wonder if it is for us the most important place in the story – for it is the place we reside as well.

By virtue of our baptism, our decision to seek out a faith community, the life of faith we've created over months, or years, or decades – the revelations and epiphanies of our lives, the times we've turned to God with empty hands in prayer, the ways in which we have given of ourselves again and again – have those not been acts of homage and gifts given?

And having found Mary and the child, and experiencing overwhelming joy, have we not been transformed and sent out to do the work God has given us to do?

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If the first question of Epiphany is *what is revealed*, the second must be ***how are we to respond?***

The answer is that for each visit we make to Bethlehem, every year, we also must return home by another road. For faith and faithing - that is the action of faith - is not a circle, like the seasons of the church year.

It is a spiral.

We don't simple repeat the cycle every time we begin again with Advent and then visit the babe; when we walk through the darkness of the Triduum and into the light of Easter.

No, it's not a circle where we merely repeat every time we come back round. It's a spiral – where with every turn and return we encounter familiar stories in new ways and we go deeper. It is uncharted territory, taking us by another road.

This is, I believe the work of Epiphany.

The work of revealing our hearts and our place in this world.

Frankly, this is hard. Like many of the things in life that matter most, it takes work. And the fact that the world is a broken, confusing, heart-breaking place so much of the time doesn't make it easier.

But this is our mission as Christ-followers. To bring light and love, justice and compassion – whatever road we are traveling.

Where are you in the spiral? How will you reveal your heart – leaning into the power of vulnerability exemplified in Jesus' birth, life and death?

What other road are you taking this year?

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No matter how you will live the answers, today as we tell this story of revelation, we give thanks for the light revealed in Christ – who promised to be with us always – who is a companion on the journey – who invokes transformation – and who gave of himself fully so that we might do so in return.

~ AMEN ~