**SERMON Matthew 2:1-12**

This is the final week of our worship series “Close to Home.” Throughout, the four weeks of Advent and over Christmas we have been wrestling with the “now but not yet” tension of our faith and what that might mean for us today. It’s as if we’re all in the car together, repeating *“Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet?”* like children too young to really grasp a sense of how long hours or miles really are.

This tension is really between where we are and where we want to be. It’s between the world we have and the world we want, who we are and who we want to become. All this “now but not yet” tension can easily leave us feeling frustrated, even defeated. And then at Christmas, we remember *again* that, the unseen and indescribable God has come to us, *in* our longing, *in* our frustration, impatience and in our mess. And instead of flicking a switch and magically transporting us to some holy and perfect destination, we are instead invited to join in the creative process of building God’s beloved community, God’s kingdom here.

We live a ‘now-but-not-yet’ faith. A faith that progressively calls us to follow where God would lead us. And on this Sunday, we encounter the three kings, magi, astrologers, or as our scripture translation says, “scholars from the East,” who do just that. They allow their longing, their curiosity, their study in astrology, and discernment of the meaning of a magnificent star to move them to action which provides them with a glimpse of the Kingdom. I pray that we would be so moved today.

And so, in our text from the Gospel of Matthew, these magi, upon observing the birth-announcement star, followed it. Leaving the safety of their homes and embarking on a journey to pay homage to the king that the star revealed. After a brief visit to Herod the designated king of the occupied territory of Judah, the magi found Jesus. In Bethlehem, a small village, not in the city center of political and ruling powers. In a humble house, not in the palace, among the regular people, the poor and vulnerable, not the wealthy and powerful. In the arms of a young mother.

The realities surrounding this ‘toddler-King’ didn’t conform to anything remotely considered “royal.” To us, reading this passage today, these uncommon characteristics of Jesus’ early “rule” fit the narrative we know. We don’t question Jesus as King because we know he ushers in a mysterious Kingdom like no other. And despite their lack of knowledge of the kind of Kingdom Jesus will one day preach, the Magi know the same. There is no mention that the magi questioned the legitimacy of Jesus as the very “King of the Jews” that the star had led them to. The star had stopped over the place where the child was, and they were overjoyed. The birth of Jesus announced God’s kingdom, and he was worthy of their gifts, their honor, and their loyalty.

Then, in the final verse of our text, we read that, “In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. Instead, they worked out another route…” and went home by another way in defiance of Herod’s order.

We know very little really about these ‘Wise Men’ from the Gospel reading itself, but biblical historians and scholars say that, rather than kings, these magi more likely belonged to the priestly caste within Zoroastrianism, a religious tradition from Persia. This priestly caste, according to early Persian writings and artifacts, is one that had evidently gained an international reputation for astrology, a highly regarded science of its day. All this is more than just interesting information however, it completes blows up our traditional understandings of who God calls, who God gathers in and invites to be a part of building the Divine kingdom here on earth, even from the moments in which Jesus drew his first embodied breaths.

These stories, once again, reminds us of the company God gathers to witness and worship the Christ child. Non-Jews, foreigners, outcast shepherds, strangers, unwed parents—these are the people who come to celebrate God in flesh. And…Herod, representing imperial power and violence, representing a wholly human understanding of power and rule, is kept away.

God’s radical grace is wondrously frightening. I experience a bit of a shudder as I think of the implications of portraying the Magi as scientists who practiced another religion, because to do so pushes me to expand my understanding of both the ways God reaches out to people to announce good news in and through Christ and what it means for individuals to have faith and for gatherings of the faithful to be church.

The Magi did not come looking for the Christ through preaching, liturgy, sacrament, a welcoming congregation, or a vital social ministry — things I hold dear. They came seeking the Christ after studying the night skies. As someone who holds on to favorite, cherished ways that God works to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith, it’s always wondrously frightening to realize anew that God’s own work of embracing all people is more “mystery” than “formula,” because God’s ways are always bigger than my understanding.

The alternative, of course, is to join Herod in not seeing God’s ever-expanding embrace, or feeling threatened by it, and instead giving way to just plain fear: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3). Herod jealously reached out himself, just far enough to violently protect his place and preserve his power. We too can feel jealous when those we see as “visitors” or “foreigners” show up seeking Christ due to experiences outside of our purview and control.

And yet, God’s ways are always bigger than our understanding. We weren’t given a king with a proper coronation; we were given a baby born in poverty to an unwed mother. We weren’t given a soldier, amassing armies to claim land, but a man who gathered teenaged fisherman, outcasts, and sinners to nonviolently fight for hearts and souls through sacrificial love. We weren’t given a clear path, a map, but mysterious teachings of a Kingdom that can never be properly defined, just approximated . . . “The Kingdom is like this . . .” And like the Magis following their star, we must follow our glimpses of Christ in the world, our sensing of the Kingdom around us. And we must continue to reorient ourselves to it, in 2022 and for the length of our lives. For it is this new path, this way of the Christ, that will lead us further and deeper into God’s love and wild imagination than we could ever dream. Amen.