

# A Reflection on Reflecting

## A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher

### Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio

### January 2, 2022—Epiphany Sunday<sup>1</sup>

- Matthew 2:1-12 (Good News Translation) <sup>1</sup> Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterward, some men who studied the stars came from the East to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him."  
<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard about this, he was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He called together all the chief priests and the teachers of the Law and asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"  
<sup>5</sup> "In the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they answered. "For this is what the prophet wrote:  
*<sup>6</sup> 'Bethlehem in the land of Judah, you are by no means the least of the leading cities of Judah; for from you will come a leader who will guide my people Israel.'*"  
<sup>7</sup> So Herod called the visitors from the East to a secret meeting and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: "Go and make a careful search for the child; and when you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and worship him."  
<sup>9-10</sup> And so they left, and on their way they saw the same star they had seen in the East. When they saw it, how happy they were, what joy was theirs! It went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>11</sup> They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.  
<sup>12</sup> Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.
- Isaiah 60:1-3, 6 (Common English Bible)  
<sup>1</sup> Arise! Shine! Your light has come; the LORD's glory has shone upon you.  
<sup>2</sup> Though darkness covers the earth and gloom the nations,  
the LORD will shine upon you; God's glory will appear over you.  
<sup>3</sup> Nations will come to your light and kings to your dawning radiance....  
<sup>6</sup> Countless camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah.  
They will all come from Sheba, carrying gold and incense, proclaiming the LORD's praises.

Our Moravian star — a symbol for Jesus "the light of the world" — reminds me of a story told by preacher John Claypool. Several years ago a family visited Carlsbad Caverns. When they reached that point in the tour when the guide extinguishes all the lights to give people the experience of total darkness, a little boy began to cry out in fear. But his older sister gave him comfort. "Don't worry, little brother!" she said. "Don't worry! There's somebody here who knows how to turn on the lights!"

Friends, the One who declared "Let there be light!" has sent a light to the world, a light that the world's worst, deepest darkness could not overcome. We have seen God's glory in the light that we know as Jesus Christ.

The season of Christmas ends with a celebration of the Light of the World. That day — which is actually Thursday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, is called "Epiphany." That Greek word means "manifestation" because the love of God became visible and present to you and me (manifest) in the person of Jesus, the Son of God, born to Mary and Joseph. Our ability to see God in Jesus Christ is the reason that our worship space is graced by a Moravian star, reminiscent of that fabled Star of Bethlehem.

The Christian Church has come to use the holy day of Epiphany to commemorate the scriptural account when the Wise Men visited the Holy Family. What a great story it is — so picturesque in our imaginations, whether we envision it as portrayed at the Radio City Christmas Spectacular with opulent costumes and brilliant

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a sermon entitled "In Motion, or Only Going Through the Motions?" originally preached January 5, 2003

stage effects, or more likely by children wearing bathrobes and headscarves as they act out the biblical story in a church school program.

There is so much I could say about this story.

- We could explore the astronomical aspects of fabled “star in the east.” What sort of heavenly body was this so-called Star of Bethlehem? A conjunction of planets? A supernova? Was it a miraculous celestial object created by God solely for this purpose?
- We could explore the nature of the gifts that were given to the young child and his parents. We’d note that gold, frankincense and myrrh were inappropriate gifts for a baby. But we could ask if the gifts were intended to signal that Jesus would become “King of kings” and ruler of all peoples.
- We could ponder the significance of the wise men being told to return to their homeland by a road other than the one they’d come by – was that merely a security warning because of the impulsive anger of Herod, or was there also a message about how their lives would never be the same after encountering Jesus Christ?

There are so many things we could explore in this story we think we know so well.

But let’s think for just a moment about the characters in this story – the so-called Wise Men who looked for signs indicating that important events were unfolding somewhere in the world. Their first information came from that star that rose in the East, according to what Matthew’s gospel said. But the star didn’t tell them enough. They need to consult the Hebrew scriptures, and to do that they traveled to Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship, where the scriptures directed them to proceed to Bethlehem, a village about an hour’s walk away.

But do you realize what happened in the meantime? To consult the Hebrew scriptures, the Wise Men had to talk to the priests who were serving in the palace of King Herod of Jerusalem and Judea. Herod himself was not Jewish, which meant that the Jews called him a “gentile.” But the Roman emperor had put Herod in charge of this land populated largely by Jews, so Herod gave himself the title, “King of the Jews.” Consequently, a gentile king employed Jewish priests to help him understand the minds and hearts of the people he ruled over.

As faithful Jews, these priests would be focused on the desire of all Judaism, namely, to look for the coming of God’s promised Messiah, God’s Chosen One. But what actually happened, according to Matthew’s gospel? The Wise Men consulted with the priests, the priests heard from the Wise Men about a star sign of a king’s birth, and the priests told the Wise Men about the prophecies of the birth of the Messiah. Then the Wise Men decided to continue on to Bethlehem.

But then what did the priests do? They didn’t say, “Hey, you know what? This one sounds ‘legit.’ We should go with these guys and see what’s stirring in Bethlehem.” But they didn’t. The priests didn’t act on their faith. As Bible scholar Thomas Long once put it, “The chief priests and scribes know the [scriptures], but they miss the

Messiah....”<sup>2</sup> And yet some foreigners – gentiles at that! – traveled great distances to find and visit and worship Jesus, and then to return to their daily lives spreading the impact of their encounter.<sup>3</sup>

Through the Magi we have encountered God’s savior born into our world. What do we do now? Reflect Christ’s compassion, acceptance, forgiveness – reflect his love in the way we live our lives so that others will be drawn to his light, too.

Robert Fulghum, probably best known for his little piece, “All I’ve Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” tells the story of attending a meeting that was about to wrap up.

When the leader asked, “Are there any other questions?” Fulghum couldn’t resist the temptation, so he asked, “What is the meaning of life?”

Fulghum said the usual expected laughter followed, and people stirred to go. But then, another man in the room, Dr. Alexander Papaderos, held up his hand and stilled the room. He looked at Fulghum for a long time, asking with his eyes if he was serious, and seeing from his eyes that he was, said, “I will answer your question.”

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, Dr. Papaderos fished into the leather billfold and brought out a very small, round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place.

“I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine—in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

“I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light—truth, understanding, knowledge—light is there, and it will only shine in dark places if I reflect it.

“I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, [with who I am] I can reflect light into the dark places of this world—into the dark places [of the human

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 19

<sup>3</sup> SermonWriter, January 5, 2003

heart]—and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. That is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”<sup>4</sup>

The priests of Herod were going through the motions. They had all the indications—the scriptures, the prodding of inquiring visitors, even a supernatural sign. And yet if they’d actually tried to embody the faith they professed—if they’d actually looked for the Messiah that they claimed they had been waiting for for these many centuries—they would have discovered that he had been born just five miles south of town, in a sleepy little burg called House of Bread (which is what Bethlehem means in Hebrew). Those priests serving under Herod could have joined the wise men in worshiping Jesus. But they were content to go through the motions.

We need to be like the Wise Men who hopped on their camels and made tracks! The light of Jesus Christ has been shown to us; the Light of the World has shined upon us. God now calls us to reflect that light into the dark places in the world, the dark places of human hearts all around us. Indeed, that’s a message in “The Prayer of Rocky River Presbyterian Church” written by our elders a couple of decades ago. May these words of prayer inspire our attitude and action in this new year:

**God, as your children,  
may we establish roots in you,  
grow in your grace,  
and reflect your love  
in the manner of Jesus. Amen.**

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<sup>4</sup> Story told by Robert Fulgham as presented in SermonWriter.com January 5, 2003