

Hope for a Different Way [OR Epiphany and the Magi's Star] Matthew 2:1-12
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on January 9, 2022

As Christmas decorations get packed away, they often leave bits of themselves around, finding their way into corners and carpet fibers – pine needles either real or fake, tiny gingerbread house candies, and shimmery tinsel. Tinsel sparkles like glitter, but unlike glitter that is teeny-tiny and sticks to just about anything, tinsel shimmers in very thin strips, like super chill tin foil.¹ Tinsel is sometimes long, its strands tied together into snake-like garlands that drape across ceilings or coil around a Christmas tree. Tinsel reflects nearby light and sparkles even when the lights are dim. It's inexpensive and widely available so it's not surprising that tinsel fell into the hands of the five of us siblings when we were little. Just having left my dad who was losing his fight with mental illness, Mom and the five of us kids were starting over and getting ready for Christmas. Like anyone's memory from childhood, mine are a bit spotty. But I remember sitting at a table with tinsel, scotch tape, and a hanger – watching my sister tape tinsel garland to the wire hanger that had been shaped into a star for the top of our Christmas tree. I now have that star with its singed scotch tape. It hangs by a thick red ribbon from my ceiling in the kitchen every year from the four weeks before Christmas through its 12 days, from Advent through Epiphany.

Six weeks of the shimmering tinsel star in my kitchen hardly compares to the years long journey of the Magi in our Bible story today. They're sung about as kings or talked about as wise men, but those translation choices were made well after Jesus' birth.² The Magi is what they were called in Biblical Greek. They were from the East, which at that time meant out towards Persia or Babylon now modern-day Iran and Iraq. Guided by a star, their journey ended with gifts of gold and spices given to a toddler Jesus by the time they finally arrived. We include the Magi in our nativity sets for simplicity's sake not for Biblical accuracy. Simplicity is helpful. It helps us shorten a story into manageable parts so that we can tell the story and understand it.

¹ Tinsel has a history dating back to the 1600s. Check it out at <https://www.thefactsite.com/history-of-tinsel/>

² Sandra Sweeney Silver. Early Church History: Who Were the Magi? "In the ancient Middle Eastern world these Magi were trusted advisors to kings, were learned men proficient in the knowledge of mathematical calculations, astronomy, medicine, astrology, alchemy, dream interpretation and history as well as practitioners of magic and paranormal arts." <https://earlychurchhistory.org/beliefs-2/who-were-the-magi/>

The Magi capture our imagination. Not just ours. Early Christian writers, preachers, artists, and singers too. In the Ancient Near East, the Magi were astronomers and magicians who advised kings. Their visit to Jesus and the Feast of the Epiphany are a time to celebrate the *good news of Jesus to the great joy of all the people*.³ Magi represent the inclusive good news for “all the people” because they couldn’t have been more foreign to our Jewish cousins in the faith who first heard this story. These magical advisors to kings also reveal God working through unexpected people in the Bible yet one more time.

The Magi are unexpected people, and they do unexpected things...well, after they do the expected thing by checking in with King Herod. It makes sense as advisors to Eastern kings that they would consult with King Herod to continue searching for the King of the Jews. Herod is so frightened by the Magi’s news that Jerusalem was frightened with him. I wonder if Jerusalem was frightened knowing that Herod was afraid, because a fearful king is a terrifying king. Fearful kings do violent things as their fear turns to anger. Case in point, after the Magi left town a different way to avoid Herod, the holy family escaped to Egypt just before Herod “sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, according to the time that he had learned from the [Magi].”⁴ Herod was fearful and angry and violent to the point of killing children.

We too live in a time of violence, suffering and sickness. Caution is advised as we try to interpret God’s intentions or activity in any event. More recently we saw the carnage wrought by hundreds of insurrectionists in D.C. and a lone gunman closer to home, or the ashes of someone’s home destroyed by fire, or the deathbed of someone’s loved one in pandemic.⁵ Proceed with caution when interpreting God’s intentions or activity in any event. We are not God. We can mistakenly imply that God was with some people and not others if we confuse God’s blessing with a house still standing after the fire or someone still breathing after an infection.⁶ Epiphany isn’t only about the Magi’s star journey to see Jesus,

³ Luke 2:10

⁴ Matthew 2:13-18 These few verses summarize the holy family’s escape to Egypt and what is known as “The Slaughter of the Innocents.” The stories are worth reading because we don’t hear them in the regular schedule of Sunday worship scripture a.k.a. Revised Common Lectionary.

⁵ Without preaching the details, the shooter who recently shot and killed people across Denver and Lakewood, the 1/6/2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, the Marshall fire in and around Boulder CO, and Covid deaths, are inferred.

⁶ Ryan Warner interviews Isaac Sendros on Colorado Matters: When the evacuation order for the Marshall Fire came, the 600-member staff of Avista Adventist Hospital in Louisville sprang into action. The hospital's CEO

the escape to Egypt, and the threat of Herod. It's also about the Magi's return home a different way after visiting Jesus. They first met Jesus when he was still little, the embodiment of hope not yet matured. Scripture assures us that the King of the Jews' birth, life, death, and resurrection means something different is happening along with what we see and experience. The short word for this is hope.

Kids have a way of making a way when it seems like all is lost. Like when my siblings and I made that star for the top of our Christmas tree. The tinsel star as reminder of resilience through trauma and making a way when all seems lost. For us, the child-like wonder of Christmas crafted a star of hope. Kids are great at making a way when the evidence presents a wall. Flash to the Magi who followed a star as months turned into years, finding their way through a perilous journey to give their gifts to Jesus. Christians through the centuries have also made a way through whatever the circumstances of the moment may be. On January 6 every year, Christians worldwide celebrate Epiphany. January 6 is also now recorded in our country's history as one of violent conflict over power. As Jesus followers, we are offered a different way in the face of violence and power – the wonder of Christmas revealing Jesus as the star of hope.

We sang a Gathering Song at the beginning of worship today – Christ be our Light. The song led us in prayer as we praised Christ for lighting the way of peace, hope, and salvation. Quite often, maybe far too often, the ones we need saving from is ourselves. Prone to conflict, scape-goating, and violence as both catharsis and solution, Christ shines light on the futility of those ways while guiding us on a different way to love not just ourselves but our neighbors too; to love not just our neighbors but our enemies too. Christ shines the love of God first – the unconditional, ever-expanding love of God for you. Epiphany is a good day for hope as Christ shines Star-light on a different way for us. Thanks be to God and amen.

Isaac Sendros recounts how they cleared everyone from preemies to COVID patients.

<https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/how-to-evacuate-a-hospital-the-story-of-clearing-out-avista-adventist/>