



Rev Chris Taylor - 1-06-19
Home By Another Way

Today is Epiphany. It is always January 6th regardless of whether it falls on a Sunday or not. It is the day after the twelve days of Christmas, and a day we associate with the story of the magi and their journey which captures the very definition of an epiphany: an encounter with or manifestation of the divine.

Although the magi followed a star, their story should not be taken as an endorsement of astrology. It is a recognition, rather, that creation itself is a witness to God. As Paul would put it in his epistle to the Romans, “Ever since the creation of the world [God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom. 1:20).

But even then, nature could only take the magi so far. It led them to Jerusalem; but once there they needed something more to finish the journey. They needed the guidance that only Scripture could offer. That’s where Herod’s priests and scribes turned; what they found when they turned to Micah 5:2, “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.”

Part of what makes this text so powerful is that these were outsiders who found Jesus. They weren’t Jews but gentiles. The people you might expect to be among the first to find him – the King of Israel and his priests and scribes – they missed it, and because they did this story becomes something of a warning to us. We can’t take our relationship with God for granted. If they could miss Jesus, so can we even though (like them) we are a part of the religious establishment.

We can understand how it happened to Herod. Power, for him, was everything and he saw the birth of the Messiah not as something to be celebrated but as a threat. He was ruthless in his commitment to holding onto that power, killing members of his own family to preserve it. No great surprise, then, that he would order the execution of every child under two in Bethlehem in an effort to destroy the Messiah. He wanted nothing to do with the “King of the Jews.”

So Herod becomes our first warning. If, like Herod, we value anything more than God than that will keep us from the experience of God. It might not be power for us, but there are all kinds of other possibilities: for example; success or pleasure or financial gain. The point is, whatever we value most becomes our god – it is what we serve, it is what drives our choices. Like Herod, we can give lip-service to God but we will never know the life-changing power of God’s presence in our lives. We will end up missing the one thing that matters most: the living Christ.

There are two more warnings here. They come to us not in Herod, but in the priests and scribes that he consulted. These were the religious leaders of the Jews; the ones we would have thought would be the most eager to go to Bethlehem and worship the child. It wasn't their love of power that kept them away. It was a couple of other things.

The first was their expectations. They expected the Messiah to be a great warrior, or a brilliant politician – someone who would become King and lead Israel to a place of pre-eminence above all the other nations. Jesus didn't fit that. He didn't come with armor and sword. He wasn't at the head of some massive army. There was nothing over-powering in his personality or appearance. Just the opposite. As the prophet Isaiah once put it: "He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2).

So Jesus didn't match their expectations of what a Messiah should be. Their expectations became a barrier to the real thing. And so can ours. We all know people who have turned to Jesus, gotten excited about Jesus, but ended up turning away because Jesus disappointed them. Maybe they expected him to make everything perfect in their lives and it didn't happen. Or maybe they expected him to keep them and those they loved from any harm.

But Jesus doesn't always work that way. That's not his promise. The peace he offers isn't the absence of conflict or pain. It is something much deeper, something we find even in the midst of struggle or tough times. And yes, there is joy in this life to which he calls us, but it is not the joy of getting everything we ever wanted. It is the far deeper joy – the quiet and more lasting joy – that comes with self-giving love.

Are our expectations keeping us from Jesus? The real Jesus will always surprise. The real Jesus will move and act in ways that at times make no sense to us. His ways are not our ways. He sees a much bigger picture. The key here is not to let our preconceptions or expectations keep us from him.

The final warning comes in this powerful force that we call stasis. Within any system, any individual, there will always be a strong pull towards the status quo. When does a rocket need the most power? It is when it is first taking off. It is when it is breaking free of all those forces that would keep things exactly the way they are. So for those religious leaders of Jesus' time: it is not that they didn't want a Messiah. The issue, rather, was that in their heart of hearts, they simply didn't want to change.

Back in the 1950s therapists discovered a surprising dynamic in their work with alcoholics. Again and again they found patients who were moving towards recovery but who, when they moved back into their environments, would slide back into their old behaviors. As they delved more deeply into what was going on, what they found was that sometimes the people around the patient – their spouse, their siblings, their co-workers – were actually sabotaging the recovery.

These people would insist they wanted the patient to recover, but oftentimes at an unconscious level, they had too much invested in keeping things the same.

Don't underestimate the power of stasis in your life. Knowing the truth will indeed set us free, but sometimes we don't really want that freedom. Sometimes what we already know just feels a whole lot safer than an uncertain future. That's what happened to those religious leaders. They longed for the Messiah, but at the same time they didn't want to change. There was this large part of them that wanted to keep things exactly the way they already were.

Embracing Jesus means being open to change. If we are hanging tightly to the way things are, then we, like those religious leaders, are going to miss the life-giving, life-transforming Messiah as he moves in our midst.

I love the final phrase of our text this morning, "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they [the magi] left for their own country by another road" (Mt. 2:12).

They went home by another way. They changed. And that's what happens when you encounter Jesus; what happens when the truth breaks into our lives. A change in our values. A change in our priorities. A change in the way we look at life itself.

What can you and I do to meet the Messiah? We can follow the magi. "Seek first the Kingdom of God." That's the message this morning. Seek Jesus above anything else. Let go of any expectations. Be open to change. Do those three things and this next year just might be the best and richest and most fulfilling that we have ever known.