

# “Home By Another Way”

Matthew 2:1-12, Ephesians 3:1-12 & Isaiah 60:1-2

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**Prayer for Understanding** Holy God, You speak to us in Scripture and in prayers, in sunrises and sunsets, in friends and in strangers, in dreams and in songs. You are speaking all the time, and how often do we miss it? Still our minds so that we can listen with a depth that we have not heard before. Still our hearts so that we can receive with open arms what it is you are offering us today. We know you are speaking, so we are listening. Gratefully we pray, amen.

We are invited to be brave enough to go home by another way, choosing ways of grace instead of ways of fear. Epiphany inspires us to reflect on how we want to live. Epiphany offers the opportunity for us to be restored to complete goodness. Epiphany reminds us that we are to be the bearers of hope to the world.

Epiphany celebrates the pilgrimage of a band of scholars, also referred to as wise people. One definition of their wisdom is they were attuned to the Divine and brave enough to avoid Herod's manipulation. You are wise when you are ready and willing to discern God's will, to pay attention to what God is doing in your life, in the outward, tangible things of the cosmos, as well as the inner contours of your mind. You are wise when you reject the way of fear to follow God's most excellent way of love.

The wise people observed a star at its rising. They were called by its light and led by its grace. And so they followed the star. This was more than an ordinary trip. It was a pilgrimage, for there was an undeniable tugging at their hearts to seek the holy. The wise people go to Jerusalem in search of the new king of peace and abundant life. But when Herod, the current king in Jerusalem, hears of these plans, he is frightened. A new king is a threat to the old king and the old order. Grace and hope dissolves fear and hate. And so in the narrative of Epiphany is the story of these two human capacities: fear, exemplified in Herod, and hope, which we see from the wise people and in the star of grace that leads them.

**Matthew 2:1-12 MSG** “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory—this was during Herod's kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We are on pilgrimage to worship him.” When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly: It is you, Bethlehem, in Judah's land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.” Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, Herod got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then Herod told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I will join you at once in your worship.” Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.”

We are invited to be brave enough to go home by another way choosing ways of grace instead of ways of fear. Walter Brueggeman wrote: “There is Jerusalem with its great pretensions, and Bethlehem, with its modest promises. We can choose a “return to normalcy,” a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability. It is amazing—the true accent of epiphany—that the wise people do not resist this alternative but go on to Bethlehem. Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganize their wealth and learning and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby...” full of grace and hope.

The wise people sought the holy one. When they arrive at the manger, they are overwhelmed with joy, they kneel and pray. They do not return to the fear of Herod. They return home by another way to live lives of grace and hope.

Saul was wealthy, well-educated, and a person of great power and prestige. Saul was a religious leader and the son of a religious leader. Saul was full of fear and promoted fear. Fear that people living a certain way will destroy society. Fear that there is not enough to share. Fear that God loves only certain people. Saul hunted anyone who did not follow his narrow view of God and persecuted them. God knocked Saul off his horse with a bright light. God transformed fearful Saul to graceful Paul. Paul gave away his wealth and lived a life of gracious service. Gentiles were outsiders. Paul proclaimed that God's grace is for all people. Paul chose to leave the way of fear and follow the way of grace. Paul wrote: **Ephesians 3:1-12 NLT "When I think of all this, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus for the benefit of you Gentiles assuming, by the way, that you know God gave me the special responsibility of extending God's grace to you Gentiles. As I briefly wrote earlier, God revealed God's mysterious plan to me. As you read what I have written, you will understand my insight into this plan regarding Christ. God did not reveal it to previous generations, but now by the Holy Spirit God has revealed it to God's holy apostles and prophets. And this is God's plan: Both Gentiles and Jews who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus. By God's grace and mighty power, I have been given the privilege of serving God by spreading this Good News. Though I am the least deserving of all God's people, God graciously gave me the privilege of telling the Gentiles about the endless treasures available to them in Christ. I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. God's purpose in all this was to use the church to display God's wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was God's eternal plan, which God carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord. Because of Christ and our faith in God, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence."**

Abraham and Sarah were living in fear trying to protect their family, land, and wealth from others. God asked them to go on a pilgrimage, to leave home, to share, to bless all people. God made a promise, a covenant, with Abraham and Sarah that God will bless them. They are to bless all people.

Jacob lived a life of deception, theft, and fear. Jacob went on a pilgrimage, wrestled with God, and became Israel a person of reconciliation, grace, and hope. Fearing for his life Moses went a pilgrimage that lasted 40 years then he perceived God through a burning bush where he is commissioned to lead the Israelites out of fear, oppression and slavery to grace, abundance, and freedom. Elijah was suicidal from his failed attempts to inspire others to love. He feared his life was a failure. Unknowingly, he goes on a pilgrimage and hears God in a sound of "sheer silence" and is moved from despair into hopeful action.

Epiphany invites us on a pilgrimage to be brave enough to go home by another way choosing ways of grace instead of ways of fear. Distinct from wanderers and tourists, those on a pilgrimage leave their current way and seek an alternative way, in response to God's invitation to journey beyond themselves, to go more deeply into the mystery and wonder of God's grace. Seekers are responding to something larger than themselves—something higher, nobler—or to an emptiness that yearns to be filled. Sometimes our restlessness is God's nudge to recognize that it is time to move beyond our comfort zone into a new realm and seek God's presence in new places and people. Pilgrimage does not necessarily need a physical path. Pilgrimage often starts right where we are, with a tug, an invitation, a call to leave the way of fear and follow the way of grace. Jesus' call to the first disciples was to go on a pilgrimage with him. We are invited to perceive God's way of grace and having the courage to follow. Often pilgrimages have long patches of wilderness and silence, both physical and metaphoric. Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit that assures us that God is with us, and God will partner with us to redeem and make glorious everyone and the entire cosmos.

What are your fears? How can you leave them? How can you be more gracious? More hopeful? Who are the Herods of today, persons, who promote fear, seek to divide, to judge, to oppress, to deny justice? Who are the wise people of today, people full of grace, seeking to unite, to welcome, to serve, to establish a world where all have food, clothing, shelter, health care, education, freedom, meaningful fairly-compensated employment, and abundant life?

Two great new year's resolution is to identify one personal fear that you will replace with grace and one way that you will stop following a Herod instead following a wise person full of hope and grace or be a pioneer leader of hope and grace yourself.

Pastor Sarah Are Speed expresses this reorientation in a poem entitled:

“Muscle Memory”

Going home is a form of muscle memory.

Start the car.

Turn on the lights.

Turn left,

turn right.

Pass the big oak tree and the empty school yard.

Look for the house with the light on.

Look for the house with the open door.

Look for the house that says, “Welcome home.”

You’ll know when you’ve arrived—that’s the thing about muscle memory.

But I am learning things of love,

and home is not home unless all are welcomed,

and muscle memory is not justice unless all are safe.

So I’m asking—

can we start the car and get totally lost chasing what is right, far off on the horizon?

Can we drive off the road and get a flat tire if it means paving the way for justice and truth?

Can we circle the trees and miss the school yard completely if this new way home includes space for grace?

Can we waste our time driving in circles if it gives us time to add people to the car?

I am learning, muscle memory and faith are not one and the same.

So I am asking,

Will you start the car?

Will you turn on the lights?

Will you take a deep breath?

It might be time to get lost.

It might be time to find a new way home.

Our Book of Common worship puts it in a prayer. “Lord God of the nations, we have seen the star of your glory rising in splendor. The radiance of your incarnate Word pierces the night that covers the earth and signals the dawn of justice and peace. May God’s brightness illumine our lives and beckon all nations to walk as one in your light. We ask this through Jesus Christ your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, in the splendor of eternal light, God forever and ever.”

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way. **Isaiah 60:1-2 NRSV “Arise, shine; for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you and God’s glory will appear over you”**

For Isaiah, light symbolizes grace and darkness symbolizes fear. Hear again Isaiah’s words using grace and fear. Arise, shine; for your grace has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For fear shall cover the earth and thick fear the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you and God’s glory will appear over you.”

And so, like the wise people, we pilgrimage propelled by our majestic, awe-inspiring, and hopeful perceptions of God and the gracious starlight that shines on us with beams so bright that our imaginations flourish with grand visions of our glorious home and our place in it. There will always be more grace to receive and share, more insights to discover, more ways to love, to rejoice, to live in peace within and be at peace with everyone. We pilgrimage to leave behind every form of fear and go forth in ways of grace. We pilgrimage on an alternative way to our true home, a home of abundant eternal life for all, a home where every person belongs, all people are cherished, loved, and appreciated, a home where everyone delights in sharing their gifts, where each person’s unique gift completes the cosmos, a home where all enjoy the fullness of God’s joy. We are filled with hope for surely, we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Be brave enough to pilgrimage not by the way of fear rather by the way of grace. Arise, shine with God’s grace, and invite everyone home. Amen