

**Matthew 2:1-12** <sup>1</sup> In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, <sup>4</sup> and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> ‘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.’” <sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” <sup>9</sup> When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

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The Courage to Change Routes

Rev. Amy Terhune

We’ve spent a lot of time this year on politics, but it might interest you to know that in the scientific world, 2024 brought about some pretty important and mind-boggling developments. For example, scientists mapped the brain of fruit fly – all 139,255 nerve cells and the 54.5 million connections between them. It took 10 years to map something about the size of a mustard seed, but the implications of the study for understanding the human brain should not be underestimated. We made medical advancements in Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats (CRISPR) technology, which allows for geneticists to cut and edit specific parts of DNA strands. This could help treat people with all kinds of genetic disorders. The drug Lenacapavir targets HIV’s capsid protein shell which protects the virus with a nearly 100% success rate, paving the way for a vaccination against HIV and other devastating diseases as well. NASA discovered a planet circling Star HD48948 which may be similar to earth and potentially hold life, and it’s a mere 137 light years away. A solar probe got closer to our sun than ever before, helping us to understand what gives life to our entire solar system. Researchers built a prototype of a nuclear clock, which is exponentially more accurate than an atomic clock, and may help revolutionize GPS systems and monitor seismic movement beneath the earth’s crust, and researchers have built the first functional graphene semiconductor, which could revolutionize communication technology to lessen environmental impact and improve speed. On the downside, 2024 was the first year that our climate broke the 1.5°C threshold measured against, pre-industrial levels, with historic temperature highs and damaging storms, record low polar ice, and permafrost thawing faster than expected, all of which could have catastrophic consequences for the planet. On the plus side, green chemistry made huge strides, particularly in alternative battery chemistry, reduced toxic waste, and energy consumption, mostly by developing catalysts that work at room temperature and reducing the need for rare metals like nickel and cobalt. Decarbonizing energy also made good strides this year, as did cutting down on plastics. Interestingly, these trends, according to an article published by CAS (the American Chemical Society), are being driven largely by the rising economic force of the Millennial generation. *[for more information, see the articles listed at the end of this sermon.]*

Now, all of this is very interesting, I'm sure, but you may well be asking: what's the point? Well, it's simply this: human beings are built to be curious. We explore our world. We seek new learning, new insight, new understanding. There have always been those among us who want to explore and understand our world and our human experience more deeply. Archimedes, Copernicus, Galileo, Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, Albert Einstein, George Washington Carver, Marie Curie, Rachel Carson, Gladys West, and thousands of others.

In our lesson today, we meet a group of people who shared that innate curiosity and the hunger to understand our human experience. Certainly, they were wisemen, for we see in them not merely intellectual capacity, but an ability to read people and circumstances with notable insight. Despite the famous hymn, they weren't kings. But they were aristocracy—they were leaders, well educated, probably wealthy and well-respected. They were astrologers, meteorologists and geologists and agriculturalists all rolled into one. And they watched the sky because that was the canvas upon which the answers of the universe were displayed. And when a strange and usual star arose in the west, they didn't see it as a sign of foreboding or danger. They saw possibility and hope. What kind of person in that position leaves behind family and responsibilities to set off on a journey that could take months or years, following a star across a plethora of barriers, not the least of which were deserts or oceans, language, culture?

We live in a society that values "fitting in". We congregate with like-minded people. We've taken to watching news and programming that reaffirms our own values and culture. We've gotten to a place where we may cut off family who vote differently. And when we talk about big cities or universities or other places where there are diverse crowds, we take precautions to keep ourselves and our stuff safe. Our world has gotten bigger as technology expands, and yet, we are sometimes more isolated than ever. And increasingly, we're more afraid of difference.

If these magi were afraid, they acted in spite of it, moved through it, and saw beyond it. They saw a star, and knew that it meant light, goodness, hope. They embraced difference. They welcomed the adventure. They had conviction that they'd be welcome, and courage to seek it out.

I mean, think about all of this for just a moment: Shepherds in the fields got an angels song telling them to go into Bethlehem and find their Messiah wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. As instructions go, that's relatively specific. But the Magi got a star, leading them in a generally westward direction. I mean, if you were to follow a star west from here, it be awfully tricky to figure out whether it was leading you to St. Louis or Seattle! But they stepped out in faith, and let God take them on a journey that tested them, to be sure, but also offered illumination, growth, and grace.

You know how the story goes—you've probably heard it a hundred times, at least. Herod is threatened by the report of a new 'King of the Jews' and sends the Magi off secretly to find the baby and bring back word. They find Jesus. They worship. They give gifts. And warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they make their way homeward by another road. Which would have been a real trick since they were almost certainly part of a big caravan. And exotic as they were, it would not have been so easy for them to disappear into a crowd. Maybe their road wasn't a road at all. Maybe it was wilderness and treacherous mountains passes for a while. Who knows? Matthew doesn't tell us.

But while facts are hard to come by, the implications of the text are more pronounced, even obvious. At the risk of insulting your intelligence, I'll point it out anyway. Going home by another road is metaphorical as well as informational. No one who seeks and encounters Christ leaves the same. The encounter changes us, redirects our course in the world. At least, that's how I read it. They risked everything to encounter God, and it gave them a new direction. It changed them. It made them new.

But let's add a little flesh to that. What might it mean to go home by a different road? Of course, no two people encounter Christ in the same way. His dealings with us are as unique as we are. But I think I may safely offer some observations that apply to most of us.

My first thought is that in encountering Christ, we can break out in a new direction that is less vulnerable to fear and anxiety. Matthew tells us that Herod was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.

Other translations read ‘troubled’ or ‘distressed’, but it all amounts to the same thing. Herod was a fearful man. History records him as paranoid, ruthless, and brutal, but deep down, he lived in a constant state of fear. He killed off one of his wives, his mother, and at least three sons, all out jealousy and concern that they were plotting against him. So it shouldn’t surprise us that he perceived the news of a newborn king as a threat, a danger, one that imperiled his rule. And he spread his own fear with violence and bloodshed. No wonder all Jerusalem was frightened with him.

I am sure the Magi perceived this in him. Given the risks associated with their journey, we know these Magi were men of great courage to begin with, but to defy a king and slip away takes another kind of courage altogether.

We live in a world plagued with fear. It saddens me that we as a nation have allowed fear of terrorism to threaten the values of freedom that define our very identity. It saddens me that we have allowed fear that there’s not enough to elevate consumption and amassing enormous wealth into a virtue. It saddens me when statistics indicate that appealing to our fears works better than appealing to our hopes and dreams. There is another road home. But it will take courage to embrace it.

I like how Rev. King Duncan puts it. He writes, “The message of Epiphany is that every person must eventually choose which king to honor: the king of power or the king of peace.

“Several years ago, Wendell Potter, a former executive with Cigna Health, made a public confession of how he had been paid for years by insurance companies to spread disinformation about the Canadian healthcare system. He was paid to portray it as inferior in the care it gave. And he had no problem lying on behalf of his employer.

“Until the day he visited his father who lived in a rural part of East Tennessee. A local nonprofit was advertising a free health clinic for local families, so he went to check it out. What he saw was appalling. He saw long lines of people waiting in the rain for hours who were desperate to see a doctor or a nurse. He met families who had lined up early and slept in their cars for two or three nights for this event. He says that as he left the event that day, he realized that in many areas of our country our health care system is broken. And he realized that his misinformation helped to keep it that way.

“So, he left his high-paying, comfortable job with one of the most powerful insurance companies in the nation. He wrote a book about the lies he told in support of his former employer. His story is published in Quartz magazine as well. Out in that field in East Tennessee, this executive realized he had to make a choice: would he continue spreading lies that supported a powerful corporation, or would he lose his job and reputation in order to tell the truth? [4 ¶s from <https://qz.com/work/1874630/how-us-health-insurers-spread-lies-about-canadas-health-system>; as used in “Which King Do We Worship” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

He chose the truth. He chose peace for himself and his soul. He chose courage. He chose to cross over, to do a u-turn, to change direction, to repent. He chose to go home by another road.

Friends, this season we’re in now is called epiphany. When you or I have an epiphany, we have a moment of awakening, a moment of truth, a moment when we get new insight or wisdom or conviction. The first epiphany every Christian has is the realization that we are sinners in need of the redemptive salvation of Jesus Christ, and at the same time, we are God’s beloved children saved by the grace of God. When we repent that sin and embrace that belovedness, we are born again. For some of us, it happens at a definable moment. For others, it happens over time, and one day, we simply realize we’ve embraced the truth. If that has not happened for you, you and I should talk. God’s Word about being born again appears extensively in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John’s gospel, and in about 24-27 other places in the gospels as well. But here’s what you should know up front. Faith is a journey. There are many other epiphanies that follow the first. And for each of us, those differ. But I can tell you this: in scripture, there are no less than 18 parables about the Kingdom of God. Jesus mentioned the Kingdom 112 times in the gospels alone. That doesn’t count all of the other letters in the New Testament. We’re not saved just so we can go to heaven someday, as meaningful as that is. We’re saved so that we can be part of making heaven a little more discernable here and now. The mission of the United Methodist

Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Hint: Making disciples of Jesus Christ for personal salvation alone is selfish and ultimately meaningless. A true disciple embraces the call to be part of God's transformative work, building the Kingdom of God among us. Every day after we take Jesus into our hearts, we make a decision about which King we'll kneel before. We make a decision about which King's work will claim us – the work of fear and destruction, or the work of peace and love. Sometimes, it's hard to tell. Sometimes, it's hard to know the right path. Sometimes, the stars all seem to go out. I know. I've been there. I'm guessing those Magi knew it too. I don't know that they expected to end up in a little village, at an ordinary home, with a mother and toddler. But they recognized God in that moment. They encountered the holy. And they let it in.

I don't know what 2025 holds for us. I don't know what new discoveries, insights, inventions, and omens we'll encounter, or how the world will change. But I do know that for the last 2025 years, Jesus has been saving the world, transforming the world, sometimes one life at a time. And just as it was when the Magi first embarked on their courageous journey, the greatest discovery of 2025 will continue to be Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

#### Scientific Discoveries of 2024 – Articles:

1. <https://www.sciencenews.org/article/remarkable-scientific-firsts-of-2024>
2. <https://www.cas.org/resources/cas-insights/scientific-breakthroughs-2024-emerging-trends-watch>
3. <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/9-of-the-most-remarkable-scientific-discoveries-of-2024>
4. <https://sciencesensei.com/the-top-24-science-milestones-of-2024-ranked-by-impact/>