

RUUMC 01-03-2021  
Epiphany Sunday  
Matthew 2:1-12  
“Following the Star”

Happy 2021, Church!

It is so good to be with you this morning. I hope you enjoyed your holiday celebrations and are ready for 2021! I am thrilled to open this fresh page in our lives as we begin a new thing, continuing to praise God together.

I think we can all agree that 2020 was a challenging year for everyone. The effects of those challenges continue, like the global pandemic, whatever date is on the calendar. As we begin our foray into 2021, let us continue to pray for all who have been affected negatively by this deadly pandemic and hope it will end soon. I pray that 2021 will bring you and yours healing and renewal with God’s abundant blessings. My wish for us all is that we experience fully the richness of God’s abundant grace and faithfulness whatever challenges lie ahead. And I pray that God will continue to bless University Church so that our neighbors and the world will experience God-With-Us through us.

Many years ago, my husband and I faced our own sort of challenges when I assisted him as a church planter in the High Desert area. He was appointed pastor of a Korean mission at Hesperia United Methodist Church. It was his first time to serve as pastor-in-charge, and he was sent for a specific task: to found an ethnic (Korean) congregation. As you might imagine, church planting is a difficult job. For decades in the USA, there has been a steady decline in the number of people who attend church with any regularity. Some research indicates that ethnic churches in the US do better than non-ethnic congregations, but it is all relative. Ethnic churches face their own declines in membership and attendance, too. In other words, he was assigned an important and difficult task.

As excited as my husband and I were to serve as church planters, we were also anxious and afraid of the uncertain future we faced. Fortunately, we received enormous love and support from our clergy colleagues and friends. Their encouragement filled our hearts with hopeful anticipation.

They prayed for us daily and shared material resources with us to use in the mission, such as Bibles, hymnals, Books of Worship, Christian books, and other kinds of “must-haves” for clergy. My husband and I were humbled by their overwhelming generosity. Even though we have moved on to other appointments, we still deeply appreciate their collegiality and kindness during our five years at Hesperia.

When we were still at the mission, we received a package one day from a friend my husband knew in seminary. In that package, we found a card and, surprisingly, a GPS navigator! That might have been the gift we used most while ministering in the High Desert area. If you have ever been there, you know how vast that area is. What made our task even more difficult was that there is no Koreatown there, or a particular area where more Koreans live than other areas. Koreans live all over the High Desert area, which meant we spent a lot of time driving to them. My husband’s friend knew the travel challenges we faced and sent us the GPS, hoping that it would ease our work. During our five years of ministry at Hesperia, the GPS faithfully guided our way every day. All we needed to do was to follow the directions! Without the GPS, I can only imagine how many times we would have been lost in the desert. Believe it or not, it is one of the most useful tools we have ever had for ministry.

In the Church calendar, today is the Sunday we celebrate Epiphany, which is officially January 6. Epiphany marks the arrival of the wise men or magi who followed a star to worship the king of Jews. I know that most nativity sets show the magi near the shepherds and angels surrounding the Holy Family on the night of Jesus’ birth. But that arrangement does not depict what we heard this morning from the book of Matthew, does it? For example, the Bible never mentions how many sages followed that star. Traditionally, we have said three because that was the number of gifts they brought. You may have also noticed that Jesus was inside a house when they found him, not in a manger. Finally, unlike those artistic nativity sets, chances are that Jesus would have been closer to two years old when the magi found him, based on the story of the Massacre of the Innocents found in Matthew 2:16.

When the magi arrived in Jerusalem, King Herod summoned them. He asked the travelers to return after they found Jesus and let him know

where to find this new king of the Jews so he could also worship the new king, too. Thankfully, the wise ones were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. We learn later that Herod really planned to kill Jesus to protect his own throne. After he learned that the wise men had returned to their country by another road, Herod ordered the slaughter of “all children in and around Bethlehem ... two years old and under.”<sup>1</sup> It’s a good thing the magi listened to that dream!

Speaking of those travelers, can you imagine following a star for that long? It must have been quite a journey for them to be on the road so long with nothing to guide them but that star. We don’t know anything about what might have happened to them during their journey. In fact, we actually don’t know exactly where they came from either.

However, like any travelers (and remember this was not a fancy, luxurious vacation!), we can imagine that they had some hiccups along the way. Being away from home for two years could not have been easy, to say the least. I imagine the magi who set off to follow that star were filled with hopeful anticipation of finding and worshipping the child who was born to be the king of the Jews. I imagine their journey was fraught with challenges, as well. Without knowing exactly where they were going or when they would get there, they trusted and followed that star. Without knowing exactly what it would take for them to arrive at their destination and what that travel could possibly demand from them, they trusted and followed the star. Even with all the unknowns, they trusted and followed the star. For two years, they trusted and followed the star to honor the arrival of the king of the Jews. They did not give up.

In the end, the star faithfully led them to their destination. When they found Mary and Jesus in a house, they honored Jesus with treasures worthy of a king. But their faithfulness did not end there. As they were warned in a dream, they avoided Herod and returned to their country by another route.

Friends, we have embarked on a journey--a journey into a new year. Like the magi some 2000 years ago, we do not know what lies ahead of us.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 2:16, *NRSV*.

We don't know when this pandemic will end. We don't know what the future holds. Due to the global pandemic and an extended sheltering-at-home order, we may feel like there is no end in sight. Yet the story of the magi calls us to trust God every step of the way on our own journey. Their persistent and faithful act calls us to follow God's way no matter how challenging the reality of that way might be. Their worship of the king of the Jews inspires us to honor Christ with our whole being, with our very best.

Beloveds, January is a time when many people make new year's resolutions. It is a time some choose to make new commitments to bring about positive changes. Remember, however, that our Church New Year began more than a month ago at the beginning of Advent. In my estimation, that makes Christ the center of our lives. It also means we are called to realign ourselves with the meaning of Advent and Christmas when we welcome the new year. It means that Jesus has defining rights for our resolutions and values.

As we begin this journey into 2021, I invite us all to resolve to follow Christ and to renew our commitment to live the way that reflects Christ's values. Let us examine our lives to see if there is any area that may have prevented us from following Christ with our whole selves. The way we live? How we treat others? Our priorities? How and where we spend our resources? Once we identify any barriers that may keep us from following Christ completely, may we resolve to take a different path and renew our relationship with Christ, just as the wise men altered their route home. May our journey with Christ, the navigator, the star, be filled with hope, joy, peace, and love. Amen.