

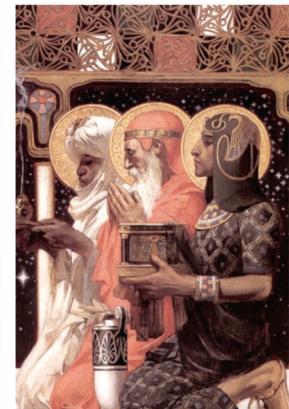
Epiphany Sunday – January 4, 2026

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12



Christmas: The Rest of the Story

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dianne Andrews at St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA.

An Epiphany poem by Jan Richard begins this way:

Those Who Have Far to Travel

*If you could see the journey whole
you might never undertake it;
might never dare the first step
that propels you
from the place you have known
toward the place you know not.*

How utterly relatable are these words? If you knew what truly laid ahead... in your life, or through the next doorway... you might not dare to take the first step... that first step “from the place you have known toward the place you know not.” ... that first step into the great unknown of the future. The Wise Men, in whose story we are immersing ourselves today, were drawn from their homes in a far distant land... not knowing what the journey was about or how long it would take. The Magi, who were carrying gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh... gifts fit for a king and suitable for a royal burial... could not have known to whom these gifts would be given. Nonetheless, the Wise Men set out on a journey with a map of the heavens as their guide... towards an unknown destination that would lead them to a foreign land.

Though the Feast of the Epiphany is celebrated every year on January 6, after the 12 days of the Christmas season are completed, we are celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men from the East on this Sunday. When we arrive at Epiphany, we are opening the second of the three chapters of the Christmas story. Since that starry night when the baby Jesus made his humble entrance into the world, astrologers bearing gifts have been off stage as they make their way towards Bethlehem. Fueled by faith, the Wise Ones headed westward guided by a bright star. They would have known neither the length of the journey, nor the destination. Tradition says that there were three Magi because there were three gifts. The number of Magi could have been more. In the ancient world, Israel was the literal crossroads of international trade routes. In art, the Wise Men are depicted as coming from different cultures, possibly Asia, Africa, or even Europe. What tradition has come to emphasize about this second chapter of the Christmas story says that the arrival of foreign men bearing gifts... puts an exclamation point on the story of Jesus’ birth. That exclamation point, that emphasis, underlines the importance of Jesus’ arrival as glad tidings not just for some, but for the

whole world... not just for the Jewish people who had long expected a messiah... but for people across faith traditions and cultures. A new kind of king had been born. A king... unlike any other king that had come before... had arrived as God's gift for all peoples... born to world that was hungering and thirsting for meaning, direction, and healing.

Though we have now added kings to our nativity sets, the story becomes more raw and real as we learn that the Wise Men, having been guided only so far by the star, needed to stop and ask locals for directions. They asked, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" When the Magis' question reached King Herod's ears, the king's paranoia kicked into high gear. Herod summoned the Wise Men, asking for details. He wanted to know the exact location of the child. We know that the Wise Men found the Holy Family... who, at this point in the story were no longer in a stable but in a house. In fact, the time span between the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi could have been days, months... a year or more... The Wise Men offered their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh as they knelt to worship the child. But, as Matthew's gospel reports, "having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [the Wise Men] left for their own country by another road." The Wise Men's gift to the Christ child... their power and defiance shown by disobeying King Herod... was probably the greatest gift of all. The Christmas story then makes a horrific turn into a third chapter.

Our Christmas story is not complete without hearing, again, of the evil slaughter of male children under the age of two, and of a family's flight to escape the massacre. At this point in the story, sweet carols morph into sounds of terror and grief. The whole of the Christmas story cannot be neatly wrapped up and tied with a bow. Though songs of peace are still adorning the heavens, the reason that Jesus was born to us... has been made all-too-evident by the slaughter of children. Salvation is needed in a world in which innocent blood is shed amidst the inconsolable cries of mothers and fathers who have lost their babies. The Holy Family, itself, must scurry to escape mortal danger... becoming refugees seeking shelter in a foreign land. It is into such a world that the Christ child was born to save.

As beautiful as our Christmas celebrations can be, we cannot simply pack up the decorations and put them out of sight and out of mind until next year. The meaning of Jesus' birth and of his walk among us is a relevant today as it was in the ancient world. The biblical commentator David Lose writes:

"We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of devastating super-storms and elementary school massacres, a world where innocents die every day to preventable illness and hunger. In Matthew's story of the visit of the magi – and the subsequent slaughter of innocents in the verses to come – Matthew renders an accurate if also difficult picture of the world.

"And that is what is at the heart of Matthew's story of Jesus birth:

The promise that [it] is precisely

this world that God came to,

this people so mastered by fear that we often do the unthinkable to each other and ourselves [whom] God loves

this gaping need that we have and bear...

that God remedies."¹

¹ David Lose, "The 'Adults Only' Nativity Story," *Working Preacher*, December 30, 2012.

'<https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-adults-only-nativity-story>

Into our tattered and broken world, Jesus has been born to show us a God who seeks to gather-up us all up in a saving embrace of love, healing and reconciliation. Jesus has come to redeem a world that is lost and spinning out of control. On the first anniversary of the desecration of our capitol building, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offered a message² about a moment of peril and promise... such times for which Jesus was born. Bishop Curry said:

“It is not an exaggeration to say that we are living in a moral moment of spiritual peril and promise. Such a moment demands moral vision that sees beyond mere self-interest and beholds the common good – a spiritual strength stronger than any sword.”

The birth of Christ was and is disruptive. The story is improbable and ridiculous. The poor will be blessed, the last will be first, and the son of God will be nailed to a cross. God’s grand dream is a story of promise... promise that dwells in a landscape of peril and discord. The invitation is to follow Jesus in an ongoing journey towards healing, restoration and salvation... and that is what we... here at St. Barnabas will continue to do... as we together... in faith, follow Jesus along on the path that is unfolding before us.

As we move forward into a new year, we will continue to worship, learn and serve. In the month of January, we will focus on our parish identity and celebrate the life we share in preparation for the Annual meeting that will be held on February 1. During the Annual Meeting we will elect three new members of the vestry as we offer our gratitude for the service of those who are coming off vestry. We will also elect delegates to Diocesan Convention that will take place in late October. In the Bridge between services on January 18, we will get a snapshot of life here at St. Barnabas as we hear the results of the Holy Cow Parish survey and interviews that took place last fall. The following Sunday, January 25, we will hear about the 2026 parish budget... and we will review, together, how we are living into our mission as a parish. Between services on February 1, we will enjoy an all-parish brunch as we take care of business at the Annual Meeting... and we will accomplish our business in the one hour allotted between services. That is a promise!

For today, we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany and the gifts of the Wise Men offered to the baby Jesus and the world. Today we bring our gifts of love to this place... as well as our God-given power to make a difference in the world. Power comes in many forms. Herod expressed his power in the form of violence as he sought to wreak havoc and slaughter for his own small purposes. But great power can be expressed in more subtle ways. In leaving town by another road and not reporting back to Herod, the Magi played a most crucial role in the Christmas story and in the trajectory of world history. In our tumultuous moment, I encourage you to claim your power and get creative... trusting that we will be shown the way through the storm and into a more promising future... carrying with us... to quote Bishop Curry... “a spiritual strength that is stronger than any sword.”

As we prepare to bid farewell to Christmas and enter a season of Ordinary time that will conclude when Lent begins on Ash Wednesday, February 18, I leave you with the whole of Jan Richardson’s Epiphany poem entitled “Those Who Have Far to Travel.”

² Jan. 6, 2022: Presiding Bishop Michael Curry’s address to the nation: A Moment of Peril and Promise <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Epiphany-message-transcript-FINAL.pdf>

Those Who Have Far to Travel

If you could see the journey whole
 you might never undertake it;
 might never dare the first step
 that propels you
 from the place you have known
 toward the place you know not.

Call it one of the mercies of the road:
 that we see it only by stages
 as it opens before us,
 as it comes into our keeping
 step by single step.

There is nothing for it but to go
 and by our going take the vows
 the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to the next step;
 to rely on more than the map;
 to heed the signposts of intuition and dream;
 to follow the star that only you will recognize;
 to keep an open eye for the wonders that
 attend the path;
 to press on
 beyond distractions beyond fatigue
 beyond what would tempt you from the way.

There are vows that only you will know;
 the secret promises for your particular path
 and the new ones you will need to make
 when the road is revealed by turns
 you could not have foreseen.

Keep them, break them, make them again:
 each promise becomes part of the path;
 each choice creates the road
 that will take you to the place
 where at last you will kneel to offer the gift
 most needed—the gift that only you can give—
 before turning to go home by another way.

Amen...