

Another Road  
Matthew 2:1-12

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While Christmas has many beloved carols that we try to squeeze into the 12-day season, Epiphany has “We Three Kings.” Yes, Epiphany is more than the visit of the magi, but this may be the most familiar story of the season, and so, the hymn we sang at the opening of worship may be the most familiar hymn of the season. And yet, there are a few holes we can poke in the narrative of this song. You’ve probably heard many of them. While longstanding tradition has added many details, Matthew’s account does not specify the magi’s names, genders, or homelands. It doesn’t even specify that there were three, though they came bearing three kinds of gifts. And nowhere does it say that they were kings. In fact, the term magi has a closer translation to astrologers, soothsayers, or magicians.

I have found the most interesting pokable hole to be about the placement and appearance of the star itself. Our hymn has it that they followed yonder star over “field and fountain, moor and mountain.” Our typical nativity scenes show the star over a stable, though in Matthew’s story, the star led the magi to a house. But not before they went to Jerusalem, five miles north of Bethlehem. Why did they do that? Did the star lead them there for some reason? Had the star disappeared after its rising, and they only reappeared after Herod’s priests and scribes pointed them in the right direction? Had they seen the star over Bethlehem, but they didn’t believe their eyes? Did it make so little sense with their understanding of the world so they disregarded it and headed to the place where they expected to find a king? I wonder if that last possibility is a tempting choice even for the wisest of humans. To not believe the truth being illuminated right before us when it doesn’t match our familiar narrative of our world, our God, ourselves.

Maris and I were on a quest to find them a bike helmet this week when I refused to believe my eyes. Maris had clearly grown out of the child size, so we looked at the youth. Definitely too small. They must be in the small/medium size. So, I took that one out of the box and put it on Maris’s head. But I didn’t understand why there was so much room between the helmet and their head. Is this how they’re making bike helmets these days? The salesclerk came over and said, “Yeah, that one’s too small.” What? My child needs a size medium/large helmet? They have already gotten that big? That was a possibility I had not been able to comprehend. I had what the Tappet brothers of WBUR’s *Car Talk* would call a “stupiphany.” An “Of course, how could I have been so stupid – epiphany.” Imagine if I had stubbornly continued not to believe my own eyes or those of the literal expert in the room. I would have sent my child out on a bike or ice skates in a helmet that would not protect them. It’s a silly example, but it shows how often we run into small situations where we need to accept new facts, consider different possibilities, travel by another road.

And this truly was a small thing. What about when we are challenged to question assumptions that we hold close to our identities or traditions or values? The magi assumed that a child born King of the Jews would be in a palace in Jerusalem. They assumed it would

be safe to ask King Herod about this. They were wrong on both accounts because they could not comprehend the kind of king that Jesus would be. King Herod was given his position by the seemingly all-powerful, oppressive Roman Empire, King Jesus was given his position by a truly powerful, righteous God. King Herod rules with fearmongering and violence, King Jesus rules with justice and compassion. King Herod will sacrifice a village of infants to cling onto his own power, King Jesus sacrifices himself to lift up the downtrodden. We may consider the epiphanies we've had, or are on the brink of having, regarding our own worldly rulers and systems. We may consider how the world has shaped us to regard power and justice and wonder whether that is the way God regards power and justice. Or is God trying to lead us by another road than the one we are currently on?

The magi's first epiphany is that the power they come to pay homage to, the power that lit up the night sky and drew in foreigners and outcasts, cannot be found in a palace. It is found in a backwater village in the home of a family living in poverty. Are we able to see power in such places? Theologian Carter Hayward, author of The Seven Deadly Sins of White Christian Nationalism writes about the difference between "power over" and "power with." "Power over" is the power practiced and taught by tyrants. It is individualistic, oppressive, and fueled by fear. "Power with," on the other hand, is communal, liberating, and fueled by love. It is the power of people with little individual wealth forming networks of mutual aid. The power of people with little individual influence organizing to change unjust systems. To be part of such communal power means we must stop, reevaluate, and pivot away from the Herods that tempt us to cooperate with empire, that would have us believe that is the only road to safety, security, and satisfaction.

The magi's second epiphany comes in the form of a dream after they visit the Holy Family and present their gifts. It is revealed to them just how threatening this new king is to earthly principalities. They realize that King Herod had told them a boldface lie when he said he wanted to honor the new king. And when given the option to follow royal orders or protect this young family, the magi choose the road of noncooperative resistance. Traveling this road comes with risks. Not cooperating with unjust rules is a threat to unjust rulers and when unjust rulers are threatened, violence ensues. All of Jerusalem knew this as soon as the magi came into town and started asking questions about a new king. As New Testament scholar Meda Stumper puts it, "A troubled Herod is a dangerous Herod." This will become apparent in the following passage when Herod takes his anger out on the innocents of Bethlehem.

We still face risks today when we call out tyrants' lies and take the road of noncooperative resistance. We may not always think of ourselves as noncooperative resisters, but that is what it means to follow Jesus's path in a world paved by oppressors. We may not be chaining ourselves to trees and risking death or imprisonment, but when we point to the star and speak out against the lies of tyrants, the narratives of systemic racism, Christian nationalism, and transphobic scapegoating, there are consequences. Many of them are social: loss of comfort at gatherings, loss of status among peers. It is risky to take that other road. But once we see the star shining in the night, it's hard to unsee it. Once we hear the tyrant's lies for what they are, it's hard to cooperate with them. So, let's not. Instead of

refusing to believe our own eyes when we look at the world through a scriptural lens, let us refuse to cooperate with the systems that would have us be blind to injustices. Let us take another road together where we will have power with one another, rather than power over one another. Let us follow the star of truth from wherever it arises within us to where it leads. Let it be so.