

“The Reason We Follow”
January 4, 2026

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus and the coming of the sages from the East, beloved in art and music and poetry and drama and Christmas pageants, is not history. It is theology: an attempt to tell us something of ourselves and of God. And as such, it is filled with the unknown.

We don’t know who they were, these magi. Over time, they were given names and a number but, of course, their names and number are speculation at best and not Matthew’s concern.

We don’t know where they came from, these magi from the East, which is not a very precise location.

And we don’t know when they came, these magi from the East who arrived at that house in Bethlehem.

They were strangers from someplace who arrived sometime—and they remain strangers, outsiders.

All of this is good for us, because our lives are filled with the unknown as well.

We woke up yesterday to the news of the invasion of Venezuela and the capture of its president. I am not going to attempt to address those issues as they are unfolding. But these recent events only add to the uncertainty of these days. We do not know how Russia will look at Ukraine or China will look at Taiwan now that the United States has decided to pursue a policy of invasion.

While all of this has been on our minds, there has not, of course, been time to give considered thought to yesterday’s events for sermon this morning.

Let us instead consider Matthew’s Good News from our position of not knowing, of uncertainty.

In our uncertainty, we are those who follow.

In W. H. Auden’s Christmas Oratorio, *For the Time Being*, the three magi say, one by one:

To follow how to be truthful now is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be living now is the reason I follow this star.

To discover how to be loving now is the reason I follow this star.

Then together they conclude: “To discover how to be human is the reason we follow this star.”

And that is as good as any reason to follow. Or so it seems at first. We are all trying to find out just what it means to be human in these days: what it means to be those who are created in the image of God, aware of our great possibilities as well as our sinfulness—all that separates us from the good and the possible in ourselves, all that alienates us from one another, and all that we would do to distance ourselves from God.

Perhaps if we could be truthful about our own lives, looking without flinching at our own woundedness and the harm we bring to others we might overcome in some way the sin that clings so closely.

Perhaps if we could be truly alive, open to the beauty in ourselves and in others, to the goodness that surrounds our days we might overcome in some way the sin that clings so closely.

Perhaps if we could be loving, seeking the good of others as we seek our own good, we might overcome in some way the sin that clings so closely.

We might, if our following were successful discover how to be fully human before the God in whose image we have been created.

If we follow it is because we are well aware of all that we lack, we are well aware of our flawed lives. We are well aware of all that we do not know.

Poets have long characterized the journey of the Magi as arduous.

T.S. Eliot imagined one of them recalling:

the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it....
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.

And W. H. Auden's Wise Men describe their following

With doubts, reproaches, boredom, the unknown...
Counting the miles,
And the absurd mistakes.

The hard time, the folly, and the absurd mistakes bring them to Herod, perhaps the greatest mistake of the story.

The foolishness of the wise is shown in that they decide to ask *Herod*, of all people, just where it is that they will be able to find this newborn king. They have gifts. And they would like to *worship* him.

Upon hearing of the birth of this child, Herod is frightened. And not just Herod, but "all of Jerusalem with him." This king chosen by Rome fears a new king, whom Matthew understands to be chosen by God. And if the brutal and murderous Herod is frightened, well, quite naturally, the people of the capital city would be as well. Who knows what actions a desperate and unstable leader might take.

Herod is scared, but not scared out of his wits, which he still has about him. His first action is to find out what the magi, for all of their knowledge of the stars, were not able to determine. He gathers the religious leaders together and learns that Bethlehem would be a good spot to look for a

king. David, the shepherd king, grew up there. And while it was a small and insignificant a town, it just might be the place where this new shepherd of Israel would be found.

Then Herod says to the Magi. “Do me a favor, would you? I’m too busy to go myself right now. You understand that. You’re important people. But when you find this child, send me word so that I can go and *worship* him as well.”

If he were honest, Herod would have said “kill” instead of “worship.” And a few years later that would be the solution that the Roman government would find to the problems that this Jesus would cause.

Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus reminds us that the world has changed only slightly since the time of Herod. The New Testament scholar, Esau McCaulley, put it this way: “We live in a world in which political leaders are willing to sacrifice the lives of others on the altar of power... More than anything, this story calls upon us to consider the moral cost of the perpetual battle for power in which the poor tend to have the highest casualty rate.”ⁱ

Arriving in Bethlehem, the Magi are overwhelmed with joy. They leave the gifts and head back home.

Let us remember: the Magi of Matthew’s Gospel, like the shepherds of Luke’s Gospel, and even the angels of heaven all minor players in this story of birth, this good news that God is with us.

Throughout the Christmas story we hear the familiar refrain of angels: “Do not be afraid.” We hear it, that is, until the Magi arrive in King Herod’s court.

Then the angels fall silent, except to warn Joseph and Mary to run for their lives.

And this is where the Christmas story meets us this year.

Along with many others, over the years, I have encouraged you to “follow the star,” to be like the magi and approach life with curiosity and courage, to be generous in giving. All of those are good things, but it occurs to me now that they miss the real point of Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus.

Along with many others, over the years, I have told you that the Christmas story isn’t over until the Magi arrive to worship the infant Jesus on this day that we mark as Epiphany. True enough. But the story really isn’t over until we see Joseph and Mary and Jesus fleeing to safety in Egypt.

The reality is that we will not become truthful or living or loving by following this star. We will not become human by following this star.

Our only chance of becoming truthful or living or loving or human will be found, not in following this—or any—star but in following the One to whom the star leads.

And this star leads to the infant Jesus, who is greeted by strangers and outsiders.

This infant Jesus becomes a refugee, endangered and hunted by the murderous King Herod, his small family leaving their house in Bethlehem and heading to Egypt.

This is the Jesus who will later tell people: “Foxes have their holes, birds have their nests, but I have no place to lay my head.”

This is the Jesus who will say that his followers are those of whom it can be said: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

If we are to follow Jesus, we must go where he is—among the displaced, among the poor without a home, among the hungry. We must go where he is—among those running from persecution, whose very lives are threatened. We must go where he is—among those whose well-being is threatened, whose lives are filled with uncertainty.

In our nation—and in many other nations as well—there is a fierce debate over the extent to which we should welcome immigrants or, on the other hand, the extent to which we should turn them away. Strong national borders are important. So, too, are policies and a sense of welcome that allow those borders to be crossed by those seeking either asylum or opportunity—or both.

In the coming weeks our Mission Board will bring local advocates for immigrants to our adult education time. Our congregation has partnered with some of these organizations on various projects because we are those who follow the One who calls us to welcome the stranger.

Let us go to those places where Jesus might be found and follow from those places. In doing this, we will know our human sinfulness, our separation from the good. And in that awareness, we will also know the forgiveness of God that comes to us and allows us to continue, to move forward.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/27/opinion/christmas-feast-of-innocents.html>