

**ETA: Delayed**  
**Preached by**  
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**United Church of Fayetteville**  
**JANUARY 3, 2021**  
**Epiphany**  
**Lord's Supper**

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Jeremiah 31:7-14

<sup>7</sup>For thus says the LORD: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O LORD, your people, the remnant of Israel." <sup>8</sup>See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. <sup>9</sup>With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

<sup>10</sup>Hear the word of the LORD, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." <sup>11</sup>For the LORD has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. <sup>12</sup>They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. <sup>13</sup>Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. <sup>14</sup>I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says the LORD.

**Gospel Reading:** Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>2</sup>In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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 wise men 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.

## **Meditation: ETA: Delayed**

I am what some people politely refer to as directionally challenged. My brother has occasionally wondered aloud “If you walk around the block, do you know which side of the street your house is on when you get back?” It’s not unusual for me to stop and ask for directions. I felt great empathy for the wise men when they stopped in Jerusalem looking for directions to the place where the Christ child lay. They had what I have come to think of as a gas station experience.

Even with a GPS system—notoriously challenging on how it counts exits from “round-abouts” or gives lane directions on ramps, I still find myself asking for directions. While I can get close to my destination, I often hear the system telling me in an annoyed voice that it’s “recalculating” or to “make the first possible legal u-turn”. After fuzzing the target without luck, I’ll stop at a gas station for assistance. I describe what I have been told I am looking for—say “the only 6 story building in a block of two-story homes, with a large distinctive logo on top.” Almost without exception when I am finished making my request, the person behind the counter says, “I am not from around here.” As a result of my poor internal compass, I have honed being “fashionably late” to high art.

The wise men, at their stop in Jerusalem, heard a variation on the gas station theme. People said, “We’re from around here and we don’t know what you are talking about!” The people, the king and the court hadn’t heard of Christ’s birth and were frightened at the changes it meant to their lives. I suspect, too, that they might have been offended that strangers would be the ones to tell them what had happened in their own back yard. They were probably embarrassed, as well. When they checked their own Scriptures, they found that they should have known where the Savior would be born, if not when. So, they sent the wise men toward Bethlehem to find the child. With a neat twist, the direction seekers were to become the direction givers, encouraged to return and tell where they found the child. After an undoubtedly longer delay than the wise men had anticipated, they headed the last few miles toward Bethlehem and their goal—seeing the Christ child.

Now, though our creches usually include the three kings at the manger along with the shepherds and angels, according to Scripture they wouldn’t have been there together. The shepherds returned to their fields “that same night” (meaning the night of Christ’s birth); the angels eventually took their hallelujahs heavenward; then came the kings bearing gifts. The liturgical calendar celebrates their arrival 12 days after Christ’s birth, on Epiphany (this Wednesday). More historically based estimates of the time it would have taken for the three to identify the sign of the star, prepare for a trek of that magnitude, and actually make their way across the miles to Bethlehem, suggest that it was unlikely they could have arrived much earlier than Jesus’ second birthday.

While it’s hard to say they were technically “late” at all, because no one at the manger was expecting them, two years after the fact is pushing the envelope on any definition of fashionably late. Yet the wise men kept going. They seemed to care less about when they would arrive, than that they would arrive at all. There is a certain courageous stick-to-it-tive-ness in that—a faithful commitment to pressing on when one is not sure of the location; when one is not sure of one’s welcome; when one is not even sure if what you are going to see will still be there when you get there, or even what it is going to look like when you get there. That couldn’t have been an easy thing for the wise men to do, but they did it.

A presbytery meeting early in my tenure here was at a location new to me. (Actually, more embarrassingly, it wasn’t entirely new—I had been there when I had preached a sermon for the search committee. Key difference: this time I was driving myself.) My GPS and I disagreed about whether I had made a left turn or simply continued on the same route. While we argued, I visited Skaneateles from two different directions, drove through Chittenango repeatedly and recognized that Cazenovia was not where I was going before I got there. An hour and a half after I had left my office, I was still thirty miles from the meeting and could figure out no way to get to Morrisville before the meeting was half over. I went home.

Now, admittedly, the appeal of a presbytery meeting vs. that of meeting a new baby, any new baby, let alone a savior, are considerably different... Still, I wonder how often, unlike the wise men, we stop short of our journey’s goal because we won’t arrive at our goal on our originally projected time line—goals far more important than getting to a meeting.

Friday was a traditional day to make New Year's resolutions—to identify positive changes we want to make in our lives—to get more exercise, to eat less, to be more forgiving, to give more generously, to re-prioritize our time, to worship more, teach more, to commit less often but more deeply, to cut back, to add on... whatever we think our lives are needing for more balance and health. Some of us missed that calendar-imposed deadline and think we'll wait until next year; and some of us have already missed our newly established goals; and so, think we might give up altogether. Some of us are so discouraged we don't even think about starting to reach for more joy, hope or health.

Whether it's New Year's resolutions or other commitments to change activities, relationships or habits, if that's where we are, let's look again at the story of the wise men. While unexpected, and arriving long after the original celebration, the wise men were received not as gatecrashers; not as ones who had thrown off the caterer's count; not as late arrivals who kept the host family at their duties longer than they had intended. No. They were received as welcome guests, their wisdom and gifts to be accepted as though they were among the first wave of admirers.

A few years ago, a friend and I had tickets to *The Nutcracker*. As often happens during the holidays, shifting priorities and commitments meant that we didn't leave when intended. Rather, we started the car ten minutes before the curtain was to go up. We went, fully expecting that we wouldn't be seated until the intermission. On our arrival, we were indeed very late. No one was in the lobby, except two ticket takers and over at the door to the hall itself, an usher. She was quite kind. She whispered that she would seat us right away in any old seats and return to at intermission to take us to our assigned seats. Flashlight in hand, she led us about a quarter of the way down the aisle and indicated two seats on the edge of the side aisle. As promised, as soon as the lights went up at intermission, she returned to help us find our seats. It's hard to know whether she or we were more surprised. When she looked at our tickets, she saw that, unknowingly, she had already seated us in our real seats.

In a year when we feel constrained by circumstances beyond our control; when our journeys have been disrupted or not taken at all: when we are urgently desiring to be on the road to restored life, relationship and happiness, it is important to remember that:

In the intricate ballet of human relationships

In the theatre of God's love

It is not possible to be late.

There are always seats at this Table;

seats prepared especially for us.

We will not be turned away.

There is no waiting --

no waiting for calendars

or intermissions

no waiting for the end of a pandemic,

no waiting for the God

who is waiting for us with open arms.

New relationships or relationships made new by reconciliation or forgiveness; new careers, new learning, healing or possibility...

waiting here for us everyday

if we dare to keep watching the star,

dare to keep journeying

and dare to believe that we are indeed welcome.

whenever

however, we arrive.