

“The Difference Makers: Light”
Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate Epiphany which is the festival of light and the celebration of the journey of the Magi guided by the star of Bethlehem. Humans have always been fascinated by stars and astrological phenomena. A few weeks ago, there was a great buzz in the news about an interstellar rock that was sighted in our solar system. (show picture of the rock) It looked like oblong rock that is a quarter mile long that came from another solar system. The thing about this rock that actually caught everybody's attention in the beginning was that it was on a trajectory that you would not expect from our own solar system. So, it was a visitor from afar. There were great many speculations about this rock and a lot of study of its nature and origin. It will give scientist a lot to study and learn. Think also of all the hype that went on this past summer with the solar eclipse.

The rising of a star has been seen as a sign of a new era or of the birth of an important leader who would change the course of history. In Isaiah 60:1 we hear the word of the prophet, “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” and see the connection to the coming of the light in Christ. The same was true of the Magi as they followed the stars and saw a star that indicated to them the birth of a special leader who would usher in a new era in the world. Of course, the logical conclusion would have been to go the ruler's palace in Jerusalem because that is where one would expect the beginning of a new era. But Herod's palace was the last place God was bringing a new era of salvation to the world. Herod ruled for 37 years. At the time of the birth of Jesus, he was towards the end of his life and was even more suspicious of any threat to his power. Herod had executed three of his sons when he believed they were a threat to his rule. Herod had ten wives, one of which was executed on his orders. Herod claimed to be the king of the Jews even though he was not officially a king. He was a ruler appointed by Rome. Herod tortured people, imposed backbreaking taxes, and disregarded the religious and national hopes of the people. His rule was known as a rule of terror. He would have been the last person to help bring transformation and salvation to Israel. His palace was the heart of the darkness of that age. Yet, this was the place the Magi assumed they would find the special leader. So, when the Magi visited him and shared with him their search for a newborn king of Israel, we can only imagine what went through his mind. These wise men from the east came looking for a new king while Herod wanted to be the only true king of Israel. They had the audacity to tell Herod that they saw a star which they followed to find this special king. Even though these men were most likely not Jewish, Herod took their words of prophecy seriously. He was frightened and even all the city of Jerusalem was frightened. But Herod played along and asked them to come back to him once they found this child in order to learn about him and worship him. What Herod wanted was to learn about the child and eliminate him as a potential threat. He was ready to work with anyone and in any possible way to eliminate the threat of losing his power.

What is interesting in this story of course is the amazing role of the Magi. Even though we are not told much about them in our Bible story, they play a critical role. We are not told how many of them there were. We are not told their names or country of origin. We are not told how they happened upon their wisdom to seek the child. But what we are told is that they play an essential role in protecting Jesus from Herod. After receiving a vision of the harm which Herod was intending for Jesus, the Magi decide to go home by another way, a road less travelled! Even though they risked their own safety, the Magi found a way to resist the dangerous and violent powers of Herod. They were difference makers!

Herod and the Magi represent two different approaches to life and power. The first approach which is that of Herod's is the one we are most familiar with in politics and in most of life. This is the view of life as one giant game of competition for resources and power. The underpinning premise of this approach is that there is not enough for all of us and we have to compete with each other in order to win our share of what we want. This means that there are always winners and losers in the game. It also means that competing to gain control of what we want is the major motivation that drives our actions. In Herod's mind, there is not enough power to share. If he shares, it would mean loss. Herod of course is an extreme example. But Herod is not the only dictator in history who has been brutal to innocent people to maintain his power. In the face of threats to our security, we are often tempted to believe that more competition and dominance through violence is the way to solve our problems. A good example is the large amounts of money nations spend on their military compared to the amount of money spent on eliminating the root causes of violence and suffering in the world. Today as we consider our call in the world to be difference makers, I invite you to examine the example of the Magi. Just like them, ask yourself, "Where will the light lead me?" Will it lead you to the Jerusalem or to Bethlehem? Does it lead you to the palaces of power or to the humble manglers of the lowly? In order to be difference makers in the style and way of Jesus and the Magi, we have to let go of the assumptions of our culture about winners and losers and about what makes for the good life. Our world is no less brutal than it was in the time of Herod. Children die each day of malnutrition and violence. Children are recruited to fight wars, be used for their bodies, or to be instruments of terror. The current crisis in Syria has affected so many children. According to UNICEF, "Nearly 6 million children are in need of humanitarian assistance, with almost half forced to flee their homes. Many families have lost everything – including, for those who have fled the country, the protections that come with citizenship."

One could feel helpless to believe that the Herods of the world have the final and only word. One could feel that this is the way things are and it will never change. But we are thankful today that the Magi are also part of the story. They are the ones who made an incredible difference in the world. It was not Herod or any of his stooges who changed the course of history. It was the people who believed in the power of dreams and of stars. It was people who went to a humble place to pay homage to the servant king. These are the people who have inspired so many generations after them because they made the story of Christmas possible. They saved the life of a child. They are the ones

we are invited to follow. They are the ones who help us see the light of love in the world. Where is Bethlehem for us today? Where is the new light of God being born today in our midst and how might we support it? I am grateful that last year the star of God's love has led us to Jackson Primary School. We wanted to make a difference locally. We wanted transform lives and to share God's love in the way of Jesus in meaningful and sacrificial ways. So we dug deep, prayed hard, and engaged in conversations with many in our community. Just like the Magi had to leave their comfort zones and their assumptions about power, we had to learn from other churches and groups about where we can make the most difference and where God is calling us. And so, seven months ago, we decided to follow the star to Jackson Primary School. We knew that partnering with our local primary school could make a huge difference in the lives of the children in our community.

Pastor Kip Jacob from Portland, Oregon challenges churches around the country to partner with their local schools. He says, "What would it look like if 300,000 churches in our nation were serving all 100,000 of our public schools? Could that possibly change the educational outcomes of millions of the nation's children? Could that break down walls that traditionally divide us socially and economically? Could that inspire entire communities to rally around their schools and their children, turning the page on the story of their lives, and, in turn, the lives of their children? We are daring to think the answer to those questions is...yes!" And that is exactly what they are doing and what we are trying to do. 7 years later! Church in Portland
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Ph0bQ9vpss>

I invite you today to continue to pray for this partnership and to discern how God is calling you to be a difference maker in our community through this partnership. Turn to your neighbors and share with them your prayers, hopes, dreams, fears, and questions for this partnership. Amen.