

Well, it's very good to be back in harness. I was struck down with COVID over Christmas and then I've had a whirlwind trip to London, but it's good to be back. It was disappointing though to miss all the Christmas services. I was so looking forward to the big celebrations, but I was delighted to hear they went well. I watched on the Zoom link, which I can recommend. It was great to see it that way, if I couldn't be here in person. It was great that Christina stepped up and did such a good job. She's now off recovering. I'm grateful to all those who made the Christmas services so festive and spectacular, to the musicians and to the choir, to the LEMs and the Altar Guild who have to do overtime and to the Flower Guild who made the church look so festive. I'm grateful to everybody.

There was something satisfying about sitting at home and watching it all run so smoothly. It was a great testament to the strength of the leadership team here at St. James. I was encouraged by other things on my return, I came back to find that the Interfaith Shelter was in full swing with a full complement of guests and a great team of volunteers helping out with that. It's great to see life in the building. I also came back to hear that we'd flown past our target of 200 households as part of the stewardship campaign, which was great news. It's all good news for St. James at the beginning of this new year.

This is a church full of confidence and hope. We do read in the media stories of the terminal decline of mainline churches, but here at St. James we're in good heart, full of hope, confidence, and faith. We are thriving and praise God for that.

We're celebrating today the feast of Epiphany and in our gospel it's all about the wise men who journeyed to see the baby Jesus. They came from the East to see him. It's a great story to consider at the start of a new year, as we might see the year ahead, 2024, as taking us on something of a journey. So let's pay attention to the journey the wise men did all those years ago and see what lessons there might be from their experience that we could apply to our own.

I've noticed a couple of things about this story, which actually I've never really noticed before. The first is that I've never noticed that when we first meet the wise men, they're lost. They first appear in Jerusalem,

not Bethlehem. They're going around Jerusalem asking, "Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?" Now, it doesn't say who they were asking, maybe just random people they met in the street, but at least they were asking and thereby breaking the stereotype that men don't like to ask for directions. The wise men had a sense of where they wanted to be, but they weren't sure how to get there. They knew they weren't in the right place.

I'm reminded of that well-known story of the couple that got lost in the middle of Ireland. They wound the window down and said to a local farmer, "Excuse me sir, can you help us and tell us how to get to Clonakilty?" The farmer thought for a moment, then he said, "Well, if I was going to Clonakilty, I wouldn't start from here." Not a very helpful thing to say. Each of us have no other starting point other than where we are. You might be contemplating the year ahead and think, "I wish I was starting from a different place. It's going to be tough starting from here." But that is how it is. There is no alternative. We are at the starting point of our journey. We can't begin it from anywhere else. That's the bad news. The good news is that wherever we are on our journey, God is with us, that as we head into this new year, we don't travel alone. We journey with a God made known, revealed in that baby, Emmanuel, God with us. We can enter into this new year confident that we journey with Jesus.

There's another detail in this story that I've not noticed before, is that the star on its own wasn't able to lead the wise men to Jesus. They observed the star at its rising and it led them to Jerusalem, but Jesus wasn't born in Jerusalem. He wasn't there. It was the chief priests and the scribes who knew where Jesus was. They knew where the Messiah was to be born. It was them who, through their study of the scriptures, were able to say to King Herod when he asked them that the Messiah was to be born in the small town of Bethlehem, in Judah. They told King Herod, who told the wise men that Bethlehem was where they should be looking.

God had spoken to the wise men through the study of the stars. That's where he had met them with what they were familiar with, through their knowledge of astrology, but their wisdom and their astrology wasn't enough to lead them to Jesus. They needed

the revelation of scriptures for their journey to end where they wanted it to end. They relied on the studying of the scribes and the priests who told them what the Bible had said and where they should be looking.

And so it is with us. If we're to navigate successfully through this year, then we can't solely rely on our own reason, wisdom, and insight. We too need the wisdom and the revelation of scripture. We need to seek out God's word to us that he might speak to us through it and inspire us, encourage us, and guide us. There might be some people thinking, "Right, 2024, I'm going to read the whole Bible from beginning to end." Maybe, but I would never suggest or encourage that. Maybe a better goal is to say, "2024, I'm going to make a point of turning regularly to the Bible, of getting a little booklet that guides through it, just to pay a little bit of attention and open myself up to God's spirit guiding me through his word."

Getting back to the story. With the help of King Herod, the wise men get back on the road, pick up the guidance of the star again and journey onto Bethlehem where the star stops over a house. These men aren't just wise, they're determined. They left to Jerusalem where they were probably expecting to find the one born King of the Jews, a big capital city in a grand palace. But he wasn't there. They left Jerusalem and headed off into the boonies. And whilst Jesus is said to be in a house, not a stable by Matthew, it's still a long way from a palace.

The wise men were traveling in style. They were carrying some ritzy and expensive gifts. They were perfectly comfortable and welcome in the company of the king in Jerusalem, in his palace. But their journey ends in a modest house, yet they take it all in their stride. There's no record of them saying to one another, "Are you sure? Are you sure the star has stopped? Surely this can't be the place that we've been looking for, a house." There's no record of that. They simply went into the house and offered Jesus their gifts.

Let us be open this year to where our journey might take us, to unexpected, even surprising places. Let's be open to being surprised. This whole scene in the gospel story is ridiculously unexpected. We have rich, wise men who are gentiles, worshipping a baby who's

been born King of the Jews in a house, unspectacular surroundings. There's absolutely nobody in this story who's thinking, "That's just how I thought it would work out." Nobody, not the wise men, not King Herod, not the chief priests and scribes, and certainly not Mary and Joseph. Yet God brought all these diverse people together so that his purposes could be worked out. And the wise men's journey came to a successful conclusion. They were clear right from the beginning about the purpose of their journey. They said to the people in Jerusalem, "We have come to pay homage." When they finally find Jesus, that's precisely what they do. It says, "On entering the house, they knelt down and paid Jesus homage."

What's the purpose of our journey? What are we aiming for in this new year? What are our goals? Well, we would do worse than to adopt the goal of the wise men, to seek Jesus and to worship him, to find him.

There's one more thing which jumped out to me when I was preparing this sermon. It's the last two words of the passage, "another road". "The wise men were warned in a dream to change their plans and return to Herod. So they left their country by another road." Our gospel reading ends. I think that jumped out to me because of the context in which I prepared this sermon. I wrote it on Christmas Eve when I had nothing else to do, stuck at home, ill. I should have been in church. I had four services lined up that I had planned to do, but I was stuck at home. Never left, so bored, I wrote an Epiphany sermon.

I had to travel another road to the one that I had planned and anticipated and looked forward to. That won't be the first time that happens this year. That's going to happen again. I know I'll be forced to travel another road to the one I was expecting. But it reminds me of one of my favorite verses in the Bible from the Book of Proverbs, "The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps." As we begin our journey into 2024, let's head out confidently knowing that there will be times when we have to take another road, but safe in the knowledge that we don't journey alone. Hallelujah. Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us. Amen.