

“New Day Dawning”  
Epiphany Sunday  
January 1, 2017  
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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."*

*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.*

*They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'"*

*Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.*

*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."*

*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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.*

*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.*

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

### Following the Stars

They were wise men from the East. Guided by the stars, reading charts and maps, having dreams and hearing warnings. Leaving home, drawn by an unseen power, a mystery, a hope. Departing the familiar and stepping into the unknown; never an easy thing to do. But by faith, they go. Because they are looking for something. Something we all want; someone we all need. For us it's a new year, and it's Epiphany Sunday. For us *and* the wise men a new day is dawning and a something world-changing is being revealed.

### The Search

But first, they must go to Jerusalem. They are in the final leg of the journey and they need one more piece of information. As Matthew tells it:

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East come to Jerusalem, 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."*

They give voice to the name "King of the Jews" for the first time in the Gospels. They know something about him. And they seem to know before almost everyone else. They are on a quest and God is directing their steps.

### The Madness of King Herod

All this in the time of Herod. King Herod; named "King of Judea" by the Roman Senate. Everyone knows Herod. He's a famous builder of many structures including the Great Temple in Jerusalem, aka the Second Temple. He also built fortresses for his own people—the Judeans, the Jews. And he also built secular buildings and coliseums for Rome. Herod had it made in both worlds; but he was not afraid to heavily tax his own people to fund the building projects. He was king over the Jews, and he was powerfully connected to Rome and the Empire. But now in his early seventies, something's not right. This word of a Messiah sets something off in him.

*When King Herod hears of this, he is frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquires of them where the Messiah was to be born.*

*They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: '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.'"*

They know the ancient scriptures. And it is all coming together. And there is fear.

*Then Herod secretly calls for the wise men and learns from them the exact time when the star had appeared.*

*Then he sends 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."*

Herod. He may be king; but something is just not right. He may be an impressive builder, but a baby is deconstructing his world. He may be connected to mighty Rome, but a child with no military is invading the Empire. All this would lead to complete madness with the slaughter of the babies when Herod would order that every child two years and younger in Bethlehem be killed. Herod the Great has lost his way.

### Act 3 Back on Track

But not the wise men. Why are they wise? They also have fear. But it's a different kind of fear from Herod's fear. Proverbs 9:10 and Psalm 111:10 say the same thing:

*"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."* This is how the wise men got wise.

*When they had heard King Herod, they set out; and there, ahead of them, goes the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stops over the place where the child is. When they see that the star has stopped, they are overwhelmed with joy.*

Now they are back on track. The journey resumes. A new day is dawning and God is directing their steps. And it all leads to a humble place where they will worship, and they will find what they have been looking for.

*On entering the house, they see the child with Mary his mother; and they kneel down and pay him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

True worship and generous, heart-felt gifts.

*And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

God is directing their steps; and now that they've seen Jesus, they're never going back to Herod again. These are wise men.

### Our New Year of Mission Begins

I want to encourage you today. It's a new year. A new day is dawning, and may God direct *our* steps as we grow in our faith and continue our work in mission. The good news is we have exciting work ahead of us, and the Spirit will be leading the way.

Team Vital is now in place, and our task to develop our strategic ministry plan begins with the new year. The re-Launch of our Youth Group will happen later this month. The return of Vacation Bible School will be this coming summer. The work will continue in our Food Pantry, a growing partnership with Caregiver Volunteers of Central Jersey. There are other ministries happening in our faith community; and who knows what else will emerge? But in all, God will be directing our steps.

We will all grow deeper in our faith this year and the Spirit will be leading us. I see small group ministries growing, Bible studies increasing, and worship becoming more dynamic every week.

I see healing increasing as a result of fervent prayer, I see lives being turned around as hope is restored, and I see people sharing their stories as belief in Christ leads them.

I am confident that many great things will happen this year in the life of our church and our community, and that God will be showing us the way the whole time, and keeping us on track as we go. I encourage you to listen carefully for the direction of the Spirit, and to watch diligently for the movement of God, so that our path will remain safe, and we too will find our way to what the wise men were looking for. Amen.