SERMON
St. Peter's UCC
January 4, 2026

Scripture:
Isaiah 60:1-6 Your Light Has Come
Psalm 72:1, 10-14
Matthew 2:1-12 Wisemen from the East

As I said at the beginning of worship, Epiphany means "revealing" or "manifestation." In the Wise Men, we see, right at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, that Jesus the Christ is to be revealed for all the world, Jew and non-Jew alike.

The Wise Men – we say three Wise Men because there were three gifts – were not Jews, but rather, came from the East. By East, we don't mean India or China, but more likely ancient Persia or Babylon.

Jesus is still an infant, but already he is creating conflict, because the Wise Men not-so-wisely tell the current King of the Jews, Herod the Great, that a new King of the Jews has been born. And when the current King of the Jews pretends to be pleased and excited about meeting the new King of the Jews, the supposed Wise Men buy into it. That's what

happens, I guess, when you look up at the stars for too long. Only a dream of warning from God keeps Jesus safe, and the Wise Men leave without going back to Herod.

A lot of research has been done on this guiding star, but really, no normal star acts like the guiding star of this story. God's hand was at work here. For the modern Christian, I think we would do better to not worry about the astronomical events of that time; to try to identify the star. We also would do better to not worry about how many Wise Men there were exactly. And we need not even worry about the possible symbolism of each of the gifts; for example, that myrrh was also used for the burial of Jesus.

The thing that we should be asking, and that maybe even gnaws at our craw, is: "How come the Wise Men get a special guiding star - and apparently not too many cloudy nights - that leads them exactly to the Christ child, and even to a personal meeting with the holy family? After all, the Wise Men weren't even Christian!"

Ministers, in their annual Wise Men sermon, often point – and I think a little unfairly – to the fact that when the guiding star caught their attention, the Wise Men followed it. The minister then is supposed to encourage all to not just learn about their faith in Christ, but, like the Wise Men, also to follow him. Amen.

Well, what if our lives have been filled with cloudy nights and that in fact, we feel like we haven't seen clear and starry skies for a long time? What if we feel like seekers who are filled with lots of questions of where and why, but no holy family has yet greeted us in the nice, fulfilling way of the Wise Men? What if we can't see the north star through the clouds, and the compass only shows us directions, but not which direction? Why can't our own story be one of clear skies and holy encounters, too, instead of cloudy days, and wanderings filled with wondering? Where does the minister get off in such a facile manner, casually calling us to follow, as if the guiding star is right outside the door, waiting to lead us where we need to go?

For anyone who feels this way, at least some of the time, it's not a sign of a lack of faith. Quite the contrary, a strong faith is needed most when the path is least clear, and path markers have not been seen for quite a while.

So, how does one proceed if, after hearing the story of the Wise Men, the primary question is, "What if it's cloudy?" because that's how your own path feels – cloudy?

First, we accept that understanding often follows faith. By that, I mean that our path is best revealed by stepping forward to follow Christ as best we can, then reflecting on our path, then moving forward again. In other words, the practice of the faith is often the best teacher of the faith.

Secondly, even though each person's path is unique, we should not walk our faith journey alone. Following Christ is best done together. We can help each other along the way with encouragement and support.

Third, allow for risk. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. What if Christopher Columbus insisted on waiting for high quality satellite photos before setting sail? Many of us have seen maps from back in his time that

show a flat earth, with dragons waiting menacingly at the edge of the seas. But off he went.

Of course, we all aren't meant to be like the Apostle Paul, who took three trips around the Mediterranean in order to start Christian communities. We all aren't meant to go on journeys quite that difficult and dangerous. However, by supporting one another, we can at least dare to seek out Christ together.

When Moses led the Exodus through the wilderness from slavery under Pharaoh to the promised land, some wanted to return to Egypt and slavery under Pharaoh, instead of venturing even farther into the unknown. Luckily, they pressed on through all the uncertainty and reached the land of milk and honey.

For a Christian, venturing into the unknown by following Christ and serving Christ is part of the package. Following a path that isn't always clear is what we are called to do.

If we move forward with faithfulness, if we engage the way with a spirit of kindness and compassion, if we are guided by generous, loving

hearts that look to Christ, then we may not always see clearly where we are headed, but when we look back, the path will definitely be seen to be a good one.

The best way to seek and find the Light of the World is to seek to live out the Spirit of the Light of the World. Individually and together, we can be a light that beckons all to encounter Christ. God's church can be a celebration of all things heavenly, all things holy and loving, right in the midst of the world.

In looking at our Gospel reading about the wisemen today, one interesting verse is verse 12, the last verse. It says, "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." They came one way to find Jesus, and after encountering Jesus, they returned home by another route.

The obvious response is that, of course, they took another route. God told them to, and it was probably because Herod was dangerous. But in that one verse, we find something more universal about those seeking Christ; about those finding Christ; about those returning to their lives, but

now changed by Christ. They don't return home quite the same way. Paths are changed. Lives are changed, as was true for the wisemen. There is no way that their encounter with the holy family left them unchanged. Their journey to find Christ meant that they would never quite be the same afterwards as they were before. As one person put it, the story of Christmas changed their story, too.

As the wisemen discovered at the manger scene a new time in the world, and didn't return home in the same way, so we of the faith look at the churches around the world, knowing that the world's encounter with Jesus has also taken us in a new way; a new way that the generations since that holy birth could never have imagined.

Holy God, reveal yourself always in and through St. Peter's and all churches, as we move forward into a new year; in Jesus' name. Amen.