



SERMONS THAT WORK

2 Christmas

Will You Follow?

**[RCL] Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84 or 84:1-8; Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a; Matthew 2:13-15,19-23
or Luke 2:41-52 or Matthew 2:1-12**

There is a traditional Italian story about an old woman named La Befana who was the most renowned housekeeper in her entire village. She would happily spend the day with her broom sweeping the floor, cupboards, and front step. The neighbors all knew her home was spotless. One day as she was sweeping, she was interrupted by a knock at the door. When she opened it, she saw quite a sight: three strangers looking travel-worn but well-to-do. The first one said that they had traveled a long way. The second explained that they needed somewhere to rest and heard that her house was the most hospitable in the village. The third told her the strangest thing of all: they were following a star.

Old Befana eyed them warily. She had lived alone for a long time and was cautious. They did not look like robbers, but more like scholars or wealthy merchants or possibly royalty of some kind from lands far away. Hospitality was important and so she invited them in to stay. She showed them to where she slept and they settled onto her small pallet, pulling up her blanket, and falling asleep immediately.

In between sweeping, Old Befana checked on the strangers from time to time, but they did not stir. She wondered where they were from, and why they were following a star.

When they finally awoke in early evening, she offered them food and drink and asked them her questions. They told her they came from the East and were following a star that would lead them to a newborn child who was the king of the Jews, and who would be the king of all kings. The strangers wanted to reward her hospitality by inviting her along to find this child and bestow gifts upon him.

Old Befana had been so caught up in their story that she dropped her broom in surprise. To travel with three strange men following a star? It would not be proper! Besides, who knows how long it would be before they found this new king? Think of all the dust and cobwebs that would collect around her humble house! She shuddered as she pictured it and told the strangers kindly, but firmly, “No, thank you,” and wished them luck as they walked on into the night.

When Befana went to sleep that evening, she tossed and turned as she dreamed of the strangers, the star, and a baby bathed in light. When she woke up the next morning, she could think of nothing but the

strangers, their story, and their invitation. All the time she spent thinking about that little king who perhaps lived in a village just like hers interrupted her cleaning schedule so much that, at last, she had a change of heart and decided to follow the strangers after all.

That night, she set off on the road with her broom in one hand and gifts tucked in her apron, looking for the light of the star and peeking into every house along the way. If it looked like a child lived there, she would leave a little gift, as she could never be quite certain which child was born the king of all kings.

The story of Old Befana is typically associated with Epiphany celebrations, as it is related to the three wise men from the East who come to seek where the king of the Jews can be found. The three strangers that both the legendary Befana and our Gospel story's King Herod encountered were not kings, but most likely Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, which in Matthew's time would have been understood as astrologists and interpreters of dreams. This would not have been seen as odd in the ancient world, as astrologers prophesied the birth of other prominent rulers, such as Alexander the Great, from what was written in the stars, and prophetic dreams happened to Gentiles and Jews alike – as we see in the Gospel of Matthew, as well as in the Old Testament. Both the star and prophetic dreams reveal God's presence in miraculous ways that call those who experience each to act in faith.

The star which the three men follow becomes a bridge between the pagan astrological hopes that invite the Gentiles into God's story and the Jewish Biblical promises of a Messiah from the "star out of Jacob" in Numbers 24:17. Two disparate worlds, aligning in one same goal: hope for the future. Matthew reminds us that even from Jesus' birth, we see the walls between races and cultures breaking down. The Gentile magi are seen to have what is a common occurrence in Matthew's Gospel—the ability to be obedient to God by literally and figuratively following the light – while King Herod, the chief priests, and scribes serve as foils to show the unbelief of some of the people to whom Jesus was sent.

Matthew consistently relates everything back to Jesus' future story and puts it in the framework of the ongoing story of God. The worst sin in Matthew's Gospel is the hypocrisy of the Judaeen leadership, which King Herod portrays well in his sneaky and murderous intentions when engaging with the trusting Magi. It also forebodes what will happen later to Jesus because the past in Matthew always points to Jesus and Jesus' future. This interpretation is appropriate both to Matthew's era and the community to which he writes. There are two claims to kingship: the one in this world, which Herod is keen to retain, and the divine kingship which Jesus represents. The wonder which the Magi see and interpret translates into faithful action as they seek to pay homage to Jesus, while Herod scrambles in fear and plots murder.

If the Magi were from the East – meaning the Babylonian empire in this context, consider what a long journey they would have had to make. It echoes Abraham's obedience to God in traveling from Ur, in modern-day southern Iraq, all the way to Egypt and back to Hebron in the Promised Land of Israel. What would compel not just one person but three to follow a portent in the sky on such a dangerous journey so far from home? Like Old Befana, would you have joined them?

We have been living through a global pandemic for almost an entire year. Our journey has been long and we do not know when the end will be in sight. The ambiguous loss creates discomfort. We are tired of wandering through the wilderness, all the anchors which used to hold us in place uprooted, setting us adrift. Adapting daily to new information and ways of doing things is tiring. Personal losses, whether through death, a job loss, or other changes, deplete our emotional reserves. Many wonder why God would allow this to happen, and some have lost their faith in God. This is where our story and that of the three Magi converge. We are not lost. We are traveling toward something greater than ourselves and Emmanuel – God with us – is as close as our breath. As Christians in this broken, hurting world, we can act now to reach out to our neighbors and offer hospitality of the heart. We have what the Magi and Matthew’s community had: hope for a better future in Christ.

Like them, we follow the star that brings us to Jesus, and, in knowing Jesus, we change course, going home another way. Life will never be the same as it was before the pandemic. There is a quote often attributed to Carl Jung that was actually written by Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch Renaissance humanist and theologian: *Bidden or unbidden, God is present*. The Magi did not know God in the way that the Judean people did. Yet God’s sign compelled them to become part of God’s hopeful story. In our Book of Common Prayer, the Christian hope is defined as living “with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world” (p. 861). God is doing a new thing even now, and we are all invited to be part of the unfolding hope. Will you follow?

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