

Good morning and a Happy New Year to you all!

Here we are in 2026. The start of a New Year. We've all made our New Year's resolutions. A few of you may even remember what those resolutions were! And now the gleam of the holidays are fading. Decorations are packed up, vanishing into the attics and basements or wherever else your decorations go when it isn't December. The anticipation of Christmas Eve and the joy of Christmas morning seem so far away. Can December 25th really have been more than a week ago? For some of us it seems like just yesterday. For others it feel like a month.

Yes, Christmas has come and gone. The holidays are over and now we look down the barrel of a return to school or work, resuming life as normal as these gray winter months grow colder and the year stretches out before us. For the world at large, Christmas and the holidays have lived out their purpose and now we can move on.

And yet here we are in church doing it all over again.

Yes, the world moves on and yet the Church never does. There really isn't any moving on from the Incarnation, the focal point and truth of our Christian faith. We say it every week: "For us and for our Salvation, he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit, he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man."

God came down from heaven. God became incarnate. As we heard on Christmas, this is the scandal of particularity: that in a certain time and a certain place and to a certain family, the sovereign creator of the universe became a human being with all of our frailties and weakness. And he did so not in a royal palace as a chosen ruler surrounded with the trappings of power. He came into the world in a barn, the son of peasants, in a tiny village in a backwater province on the edge of the Roman Empire.

That was where we left off on Christmas. The shepherds are back in their fields. The angels have departed. The Holy Family, we can only hope, are moved to more comfortable lodgings. And now out of the East come Wise Men, strangers drawn to a foreign land by the sight of a star announcing the birth of a king.

Who are these Wise Men? Church tradition tells us quite a bit: there are three of them, you see, and their names are Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. We even get countries of origin: Caspar is from Persia, Melchior from India, and Balthazar from Ethiopia. That nebulous tradition is very helpful at filling in the blanks.

But again, who are these people? Are they kings, like the song says? Or maybe Magi, as the original Greek puts it, ancient Persian priests?

Scripture does not tell us. Look at the Gospel reading from this morning and you won't find names, places of origin, or even how many wise men there actually were. All we see is that these are wise men, foreigners drawn far from home to lay extravagant gifts at the feet of the baby Jesus and his (presumably) dumbfounded parents. They come and then they go, obeying the warning dream about Herod and going back to their country by another road.

Off they go and we do not see them again. But we can only surmise what impact this brief encounter with the incarnate God had on them. They leave their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh with the Holy Family and leave carrying something far more precious: this encounter with the infant king, the incarnate God. They carry this encounter, this Good News, back to their own countries, their own communities and families. Who knows what they did with it? We can only guess. But the Scriptures show us, time and again, that no one, good or bad, emerges from an encounter with Jesus unscathed and unchanged.

Luke's shepherds are Jesus's countrymen: Jews and Israelites, poor men just like Joseph and Mary. And despite their poverty, they are insiders. God's chosen people. The wise men are just the opposite. Wealthy, learned men who can afford to undertake a long journey towards an uncertain destination. But they are outsiders, foreigners with no connection to the Jewish religion and its strange, Hebrew God.

The wise men do not have a heavenly host spelling the Good News out for them and telling them exactly where to find this marvelous child. All they have is a star, a star and a feeling. A feeling that they will find something amazing beneath its pale light. And so they set out into the darkness guided only by that light and the inexorable feeling that God is calling them home.

Like the Canaanite women and the Roman centurion, the wise men are foreigners, outsiders who nonetheless are privileged with a brief, transformative encounter with their Creator—and through that encounter are sanctified and affirmed as children of God. Here are the nations Isaiah prophesies of, the peoples emerging out of thick darkness, kings summoned by the light of God and the brightness of the dawn.

And who are we, but the descendants of those wise men, outsiders seeking our own encounter with the living God?

I have seen the journey of the Magi compared to the journey we all undertake as Christians. Feeling that persistent, nigh-irrational call to look for something beyond what this world has to offer. Setting out into a dark night full of dangers and temptations to stray from our journey. Encountering Jesus in the most unexpected of forms. Offering whatever we can to God, and through giving our meager gifts we receive something incalculably greater.

And then they left for their country by another road.

By another road. Here, you see, is the hard part. Anyone who has ever trained in infantry maneuvers knows that you must take a different route back from patrol. It may be harder and longer, but the old familiar route is one of danger and potential ambushes. And we return from our own encounters with God changed and sanctified, avoiding the temptations of Herod and the world and finding our own way back through the dark so that we can share what we have discovered in God.

If you cannot see this journey in your own life of faith, I urge you to look harder! Think about what we do here every Sunday: we leave our homes seeking God, venturing out from a world that tells you there is no need to go out, no need to waste your Sunday morning when you could be sleeping in. But you set out, you come to this place, lay your offerings and your sins before God and seeking fellowship with Christ in the Sacrament of bread and wine.

And then you go out, back into the world by a different road. Oh, you may take the same physical route back to your house! But spiritually we are changed by what happens here. We seek transformation here at the altar and when we feel the power of God's transforming love we cannot simply go back to our own ways of being. We are called to take that different road, to see the world differently and chart our course accordingly.

Today we observe the feast of the Epiphany, a word which among other things means a sudden realization or insight. The wise men found their epiphany in the form of a tiny baby waiting beneath their star—a baby that contained all the wisdom and truth they had sought after in their long careers. And we, too, have our epiphany, our realization that God has come into this world to save us, to transform us, to draw us back into relationship with our creator, to make us his own just as those foreign wise men were drawn inexorably into the divine family.

A new year lies ahead of us. Let us look for God in all the stress and uncertainty of our lives. Look for God in the unexpected. Find goodness and light and beauty in the places the world holds of no account. Seek the star and the child beneath it, seek the transformations God calls to your life.

And may the new roads God reveals for your return home bring you the joy and gladness that only an encounter with God can bring.