

Sermon for Sunday, January 7, 2024
Epiphany of Our Lord
“God’s Guidance for the Journey”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa

[Click here to read scripture passages for the day.](#)

Beloved people of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

This past week my friend Erin sent her son off to Costa Rica for a semester. He’s a junior at a university far from home so Erin has had a lot of practice saying goodbye to him. This time was harder. Erin’s so proud of her son, she knows he’s ready, yet still - he’ll be so far away. Goodbyes are painful. Transitions are hard. Grief and love, loss and hope come tangled up together. Erin’s son had some sage advice for her: “Mom,” he said, “all the help you can give me for this experience has already been given.”

That wisdom feels important for us all in this time of transition. God has given us everything we need. Today, for instance, we get to reflect on a powerful story of a journey into the unknown. Sometimes when I hear this story, I feel jealous of the magi. Wouldn’t it be nice to be guided by a powerful star and specific dreams when we’re trying to discern the next right steps?

Could you just get a star to lead you right to your next long-term pastor after the wonderful interim time you’ll have with Pr. Dave? Why couldn’t our dreams clearly and reliably show us it’s time to move, time to retire, good to say yes to this and no to that, important to invest in that relationship, this opportunity. Wouldn’t that be nice?

And yet, even with a star to guide them, the magi didn’t make it to the right place on their own. The star was leading them to Bethlehem, but they ended up in Jerusalem. They knew they were looking for a child king and they assumed a king would be in Jerusalem, the seat of power, rather than in the peasant town of Bethlehem. Their own biases and preconceptions led them astray. The magi needed other people, as well as scripture, to get them where they needed to go. They did have powerful guidance through a star, and later through a dream, but still they needed the other help that God provided.

Sometimes we *do* have experiences and dreams that help guide us. I’ve shared that this has happened for me with the call to Red Wing. I wanted to stay at Good Shepherd, but God spoke clearly in dreams, through experiences in therapy, and through a deep peace I’ve experienced in my body. There’s been strong guidance for me in this particular transition. It’s also been amazing to experience how God has led Pr. Dave to you. Dave is my friend and when he called after I posted news about my upcoming move, I almost let his call go to voicemail. It was a busy day, but something led me to pick up the phone - the Spirit led me to pick up the phone. One thing led to another and now you have a wonderful interim pastor. I am so grateful.

Sometimes God’s guidance feels as bright as a star. Other times the road ahead is much less clear. Yet the help God gave the magi in Jerusalem, other people and scripture - that help is given to each of us all well. God has given us the gift of community in the church, other people who can help us to discern the next right steps. You’ll soon get to engage in communal conversations that will help

you develop a ministry site profile, a document that will be shared with pastors considering a call here. You'll be invited to think about gifts and needs in the congregation and the community.

That process can open each of you to God's guidance for you communally and personally. Conversations like that can help you discern where you experience joy, how your heart is broken open in love, where your passions are needed. God's wisdom and guidance is always with us. We're opened to that wisdom through the practice of listening. When we listen deeply to others, when others listen deeply to us, we can also hear God. We're also opened to God's leading when we listen to scripture, as the magi did. Together as God's people we get to wrestle with these odd and wondrous texts that help us to know God, and we learn to hear God speaking to us.

Pr. Dave is a very gifted Bible study leader and teacher. I encourage you to participate in the study he offers. I'm also struck that the magi even received guidance from King Herod. A corrupt, power-hungry, murderous dictator helped to point them the right way. Even when humans intend harm and evil, God is at work for good. God brings life out of death and suffering. That is what God does.

That is what God has done here at Good Shepherd. Nine years ago, you had experienced deep conflict and pain. Your hearts were broken. Yet that pain also made you open and willing to experience the resurrection God brings. God has helped you to move through the pain and into new life. God has led you to be so incredibly open - open to others, open to change, open to new ideas, open to giving of yourselves, open to the Spirit moving. The Spirit has done amazing things in and through you in this time. Thanks be to God!

Now there is pain and loss in saying goodbye. Yet God works in the pain to open you to new ventures, new life, growth and change. We have a God of resurrection. I can't wait to see what God does in and through you next.

Good Shepherd, Pr. Dave, my beloved family, we are all embarking on journeys into the unknown. Transitions are hard. Goodbyes are painful. And yet, as that wise college junior put it, all the help we need for this experience has already been given. All the help you need is given by our most gracious God.

You are God's beloved child.

You are loved, forgiven, set free for joy, gratitude, and generosity.

Your life is held in God.

You have been given community, scripture, prayer, the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, amazing music, an interim pastor, great leadership, a wonderful staff.

You have all that you need.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.