



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

---

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR  
THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY, JANUARY 6, 2019  
ISAIAH 60:1-6; PSALM 72:1-7, 10-14; EPHESIANS 3:1-12; MATTHEW 2:1-12

## THE MAPS OF LIFE



**Matthew 2:1-12** [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.]

About a decade ago, I cared for a man in hospice—he gave me permission to share his remarkable story. He and his wife were in their 90s, and he had gone home with hospice care. He was bedbound, in considerable pain, and withdrawn. His wife and daughter were concerned.

We adjusted his meds seeking comfort, and a few days after his entered hospice, I made a home visit. His home was situated in the extreme northwest corner of Arkansas—his backyard bordered Missouri on one side, and Oklahoma on the other. His wife liked telling visitors that piece of trivia.

<sup>ii</sup>He was in good spirits the day I visited. His pain relieved, he was sitting up in bed, holding court with wife and daughter and me. The best part of the hospice doctor's job is achieving relief of their symptoms so patients can tell their stories.

After a few tales about his childhood, his wife urged him to tell the story of the map. In sotto voce phrases belying his weak status, with the hiss and rattle of his oxygen concentrator in the corner a constant companion, he lit into a tale of his experience as a soldier in WWII.



It was a bitterly cold day in early January 1945 when he and his company found themselves trapped behind enemy lines in the hard-fought Battle of the Bulge. He radioed headquarters who told him at dawn the next morning they, and all others trapped behind enemy lines should make a convoy on the main road, heading back west to the main allied position.

He studied the map, and recalled fretting that the main road would become a snowy muddy quagmire with all the tanks, trucks and other vehicles that would make the trek. They would get stuck and everyone behind the pile-up would become sitting ducks.

The map showed a little country lane running parallel to the main road, but two miles south. He determined that his company would take that road instead.

He paused from his telling of the story, and gazed out the window, leaving us momentarily, and then, returning, said his fears were proven true—those who took the main road were quickly mired in mud, and they were strafed by German planes. Many died that day. He and his company made it

back safely, having gone home by another way.

He and his wife shared a tender moment as his daughter and I sat in silent awe at the foot of the bed, and then after a long pause, his wife jumped from her chair and said to me, “would you like to see the map that saved my husband’s life?”

She went to the next room and returned shortly with the map and other memorabilia, including two purple hearts for injuries he would sustain in the weeks that followed.

His daughter leaned to me and whispered tearfully that in her 65 years of life she had never heard her father tell that story before.

I was keenly aware of being present to a holy moment, and touched the relic of that map and what it represented for that family.

I suspect few of us touch maps anymore, unless you want to claim your favorite smart phone map app as serving the same way. Maps require interpretation, and while Siri or Alexa or whatever AI you use may have made life easier—I certainly use them frequently—they have also separated us further from the important human work of interpretation. It is more than following the blue line, or the

yellow brick road, or clicking on the autopilot. Interpretation of the maps of life is our work.

At some level that is what this story about the wise men is really about—how do we interpret the signs to know we stand on holy ground—a stable scene with mother, father, and babe lying in the manger; a bedroom of a man dying with loved ones present; or even the desert night where stars beckon wise ones onward in their consideration of the meaning of life. It is often in the desert experience that life’s greatest gleanings can be seen amidst the brilliant darkness.

This is our story, folks, and the maps of life are meant to guide us on the journey, not just get us from point A to point B. Yes, this feast of the epiphany and its story of the wise men following a star is about welcoming the stranger, and the universal scope of Christ’s work. I have preached this gospel passage that way many times—if Christ welcomes the stranger, then we should as well.

But in these dark times, when disillusion and despair howl in the shadows like wolves in the night, this story invites us into the work of interpreting the signs as we search for Wisdom by which the world might make sense.

Simone Weil once said that beauty is the empirical evidence that incarnation is possible. I might expand that to say that beauty, goodness and truth are the empirical evidence that incarnation is not only possible, but very patently real, and the journey of life is about coming to know that in our bones.

Or to say it another way—beauty, goodness and truth are the gifts imbued in creation and presented to those seeking Wisdom, and they serve as maps to help us find our way. The proverbial star.

The story of the three wise men, the Magi, sometimes known as kings (although the gospel never calls them that) is a beautiful story, writ large into the Christian narrative, with layers of meaning that warrant our

wrestling with the story year after year, century after century. It never wilts under the weight of scrutiny, because it invites us to consider it as our story—the human story of searching, and journey, and divine connection.

Train your eyes, your ears, your entire being to attend to beauty, goodness and truth as you make the journey, and I assure you, if you do, you will know that the Incarnation of God is real, dwelling among us, a gift for all the world to experience.

Beauty, goodness and truth. The maps of life. Follow them and find Wisdom. You will discover this Wisdom in the most unlikely of places, and standing there, you will know it as holy ground.

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://buildingontheword.org/magi2/>

<sup>ii</sup> Fred Ramage, Keystone/Getty images.

<http://mentalfloss.com/article/549938/facts-about-battle-of-the-bulge>

