Today we celebrate Epiphany. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning to reveal, to appear, to make manifest. We read this is the story of Jesus being revealed, being made manifest to the world, to all of creation, as the Messiah as the culmination of all these prophecies in Isaiah, Micah, Daniel, and more: Unto us a child is born.

This time of year, you can see a version of this story in many nativity sets or on Christmas cards or even as lawn ornaments: Three regal figures – one probably wearing a western European crown, at least one in a turban – headed toward the star, riding on camels, carrying little treasure boxes.

But the Bible only ever calls them “wise men from the east.” The idea that they were, specifically, three kings comes from an early Christian tradition. Some of the Old Testament prophecies say that kings will worship the Messiah. Further on in today’s Psalm it even names three kingdoms that will pay tribute and offer gifts. So one can see how we end up singing “We Three Kings” at communion. Which is a great song, but I think it is peripheral to the message of Epiphany.

Epiphany is about outsiders, and insiders, and who God calls us to be.

These wise men from the east were foreigners. Outsiders – about as far outside as you could get from Judea. Scholars think they were probably priests who served in Zoroastrian temples in Persia, where they searched the physical world and the heavens for signs, prophecies, omens.

In the eyes of the Jews, these men were astrologers, as bad as pagans. They looked for God in the "wrong" places—not the law or the prophets, but in the sky. When the

wise men observe this star at its rising, they travel from Persia, which we know as Iran, through Iraq, then Jordan, and finally into Judea (Israel) to investigate.

This was an arduous, months-long journey across hundreds of if not a thousand miles of dangerous terrain. It had to have been expensive; it had to have been exhausting.

To any rational person, it had to have been ridiculous. Why follow a light that might just be a trick of the atmosphere? Yeah. Why did they do that? What did these wise men believe about the world to do that? I think it's rooted in a theology of abundance. The wise men believe in a god who calls them to curiosity, sharing, and living in trust and joy. It's not threatening that these priests take other religions and their prophecies seriously and then spend all kinds of resources to go explore them. The wise men knew they didn't have a monopoly on divine revelation. All of creation is overflowing with the opportunity to encounter God, "and right now the sky is telling us that something very important is happening very far away. Let's go!"

I can just imagine these wise men arriving in Jerusalem. It makes sense they go to Jerusalem – it's the capital. It's where the temple is, where the wealth and influence are. If the King of the Jews foretold in all these prophecies has been born, Jerusalem is going to be like New Orleans on Mardi Gras. They probably did their shopping on the way, because oh no, what if we get there and everybody is already sold out of frankincense? So these enthusiastic outsiders enter Jerusalem: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? … Anybody? Any – it's your prophecy, where is he?"

"When King Herod heard this, he was frightened."

Because over here, we have the insiders: The religious and political establishment of Jerusalem. Judea is occupied by the Romans and ruled by King Herod, a brutal, paranoid Roman collaborator who had worked his way up to king of Judea because he gave the Romans what they wanted: He collected their taxes and he kept order with a heavy hand.

Herod believed there was only enough kingdom for one person. If a child has been born King of the Jews, that would be a threat to the royal dynasty that Herod envisions for himself and his sons. Herod doesn't see a savior. He sees a rival.

So it's understandable that "he was frightened … and all Jerusalem with him"??

All Jerusalem? These were the people who prayed every day for the Messiah. They sang psalms of liberation. They recited the prophecies of a coming Prince of Peace. They didn't study the sky like the wise men, so I'm guessing they weren't looking for the star. But when the wise men showed up and said, "We've put all the pieces together; this is happening now," the people of Jerusalem didn't argue. They didn't say, "No, you don't know what you're talking about." They trembled.

Why is the birth of the Messiah met with fear by the very people who claim to want it the most?

Maybe people realized that if this child truly was King, everything was going to change. And that can be terrifying. Especially for the people living in privilege, who prefer an unjust system that profits them over a justice that endangers their comfort. Look at any ad hiring for ICE. $50,000 signing bonus. Student loan forgiveness. Health insurance

and a pension – in this economy! What would happen to the people drawing those sweet government paychecks if this country stopped its slide into fascism? What would happen to the prison contractors building ICE detention facilities? Good news for the oppressed often looks like bad news for those who benefit from the oppression.

The most privileged in Jerusalem were the Jewish priests and scribes. The most inside of insiders. They ran the temple and the local legal infrastructure. Even with a Roman boot on their necks, these are prominent, powerful men. Herod calls them together and says, “Ok, these wise men think the Messiah has been born. Where is that?” The priests and scribes don’t even have to look it up. They know. Bethlehem. Just down the road.

But not one of them wants to go? Their efforts to maintain their importance under the Romans have reduced their spirituality to a collection of scrolls and temple rituals rather than a living relationship with God. They live a theology of scarcity, where access to God must be hoarded and managed so that they can stay on top. They have become so professionalized in their faith that they have lost their capacity for wonder.

Herod sends the wise men to Bethlehem and says, “Let me know when you find him so I can send soldiers to kill him – I mean so I can pay him homage.” They go to Bethlehem. They’re still so excited. “When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.”

Who are we in this story? The open-hearted outsiders who travel across the entire middle east to encounter not even their own god from their own religion – but something they know is very special? Or the cold, hard insiders who go through the motions

praying for the Messiah but won't go the six miles to Bethlehem because this truth might jeopardize their status.

I stand with the wise men … in spirit. I mean, I do like to travel and try new things, but if I'm being honest, the more comfortable my life has become, the less willing I am to make myself uncomfortable. I like how I already practice my faith. I like where I already spend my resources, donate my money, volunteer my time. I like my friends, my community. I like being inside my life. I struggle to stay open to the stars, to any push or tug from the Spirit that would call my heart away from what is familiar. I trust what I know. And I know a lot.

I said earlier the message of Epiphany is about outsiders and insiders and who God calls us to be. The wise men are the heroes in this story, but I don't think that means God is necessarily calling all of us to study the stars and go off on adventures. Some of you – many of you – sure. But for the rest of us, maybe the call is…maybe … be just a little more curious, a little more open than the priests and the scribes? And not just to religious and spiritual matters, but everything, all of creation: A comprehensive theology of abundance.

Because in the Epiphany story, God is saying, "No more outsiders and insiders. God will not be contained by a single religion, a single culture, a single set of scriptures." The wise men don't have the Torah – they have the sky, the earth, ALL of creation. That is where God chooses to be revealed.

I think God's call in this story is simply an invitation to take baby steps outside of being inside our own lives. God doesn't need to be hoarded and managed any more than my heart needs to be hoarded and managed.

Baby steps: Can I go be friendly to that crabby neighbor who yelled at me for no reason four years ago and we've never spoken since? There's a new hire at work and I don't think it's going to work out. Can I get off my phone over lunch long enough to reach out, to mentor them? Can I try volunteering somewhere new? Baby steps. Can I get outside of being inside my own life?

We open ourselves to all the ways to experience God made manifest by being willing to be led by something greater than our own comfort. What epiphanies are waiting for us when we take a few steps away from Jerusalem toward Bethlehem?

Maybe if we open our eyes wide enough, we can see a God who is already everywhere.

Amen.