

## Slide: 3 Camels and a Star

The 12 days of Christmas are nearly behind us. Epiphany is tomorrow, January 6, as it always is. Today I will speak about journeys: journey of the Biblical Magi, Magi in war zones, our personal journey, the journey of the institutions and groups to which we belong. There is much there and each will be touched upon, so let us get at it. We begin with the bible—Matthew 2:1-12

**Biblical Magi Journey:** When in Matthew 2 it says the magi saw the star in the east - the Greek word is not actually direction or a place but a verb meaning rising.<sup>1</sup> They saw a star in its rising or its forming or its coming into being. Interpreters thought the verb meant the East because that's where the sun rises but the stars and moon can rise in the north or south.

And where is east? Well, that depends on where you are standing. Let us imagine, for example, that a star appears above S'toon. On the way to the rink the Calgary Flames would say that a star has risen in the east while the WPG Jets would say a star has risen in the west. If you are in Jerusalem - East is the other side of the Jordan River toward the Jordanian and South Arabian Desert. Matthew 2 is not thinking of the East as China as we modern day readers assume. Isaiah 60:6 says all those from Sheba and Midian will come bringing gold and frankincense. Sheba and Midian are desert kingdoms in Saudi Arabia. The magi were Arabs.

## Slide: Indigenous Wise Persons Being Sent

The earliest commentary on the birth of Christ was written about 160 AD by Justin Martyr a Palestinian Christian in which he says wisemen from Arabia came to Bethlehem bringing gifts. In the 1920's British scholar E.F.F. Bishop visited a Bedouin tribe in Joran that bore the Arabic name al-Kokabani. The word Kokab means planet and al-Koakabani means those who study planets. Bishop asked the elders why they called themselves by such a name - those who follow planets. They replied it was because their ancestors followed the planets and traveled west to Palestine to show honour to the great prophet Jesus when he was born. This

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*—volume I (Mclean, VA: Macdonald Publishing Co), p.20.

supports Justin's second century claim that the wise ones were from Arabia. How about that, wisdom for us comes out of Africa!<sup>2</sup>

Isaiah 60:17 talks about gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh coming along with peace and righteousness, but peace and righteousness never came to Jerusalem. Peace and righteousness came to a child in Bethlehem instead. Peace is not the restoration of the former kingdom of Israel with Jerusalem as its' capital. Peace is a swaddled baby in a village house south of Jerusalem. What a shock - not only for the magi but for King Herod and all who were with him in Jerusalem. To a political application.

### **Slide: Munther Isaac**

**Magi on a Journey in Political unrest:** Munther Isaac is a Palestinian theologian and pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem. He serves as academic dean of Bethlehem Bible College, where he directs the annual Christ at the Checkpoint conference. North American Christians come and experience what it is like for Palestinian Christians to go through Israeli checkpoints several times a day, going to and from work and shopping and visiting relatives. Bethlehem Bible College holds traditional evangelical beliefs about the inspiration of scripture and the importance of personal encounters with Christ. At the same time, they are progressive on social justice issues and do not embrace the Christian Zionism of many North American evangelicals who believe that God gave the Holy Land to the Jews.

Munther says, because life is so hard here - many Palestinian Christians emigrate to Europe or North America. Another challenge is rising extremes of political Islam and religious Zionism. This leaves Palestinian Christians asking questions about where do we fit in and what role do we play in the rising tensions? "We're also questioning our relationship with the Western church, which is heavily involved with the one-sided support to Israel. That troubles us. What about our faith brings hope rather than false optimism?"

### **Slide: Destroyed Gaza or Child in rubble**

Munther continues: I can't forget October 7. We were horrified and shocked by Hamas' violence. We were terrified by the thought of what Israel would do in retaliation but the level of destruction in Gaza is something we'd never expected. The annihilation of Gaza's infrastructure and mass killing of

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<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes : cultural studies in the gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2008), p. 51-52.

people, especially children, continues to horrify us. I don't want to talk about hope right now. That may sound unchristian, but at this stage we're just trying to survive and live day by day. The people of Gaza are finding strength in one another and in their faith in God. They know they can't rely on anything else.

I'm convinced that people undergoing harsh realities experience God in a more powerful way than we can imagine. We hear this from the Gaza Christians living in their churches and in the Muslims who are pulled from under the rubble. Christians and Muslims both still say, We thank God, and Inshallah - we rest our case before God. The faith they exhibit in God is so strong. This kind of faith must be what sustains people in times of need. God must be present in the midst of these hard circumstances. We pray for deliverance, but the Bible doesn't promise deliverance. It promises Emmanuel - God with us.

Right now, my energy is focused on how we can end this apartheid using creative and nonviolent resistance like they used in South Africa. This may sound naive to talk about nonviolence today as a Palestinian, given the intensity of violence we are subjected to. But I can't give up on my beliefs that the Jesus way is that of nonviolence".<sup>3</sup> Munther Isaac is following the Christ star under conditions of terrible duress. And encouraging his people on that road.

### **Slide: Ethiopian Slide of Nativity Scene**

**Magi Discern Their Times:** Each of us, in our own worlds, make decisions which stars to follow. Some consider MAID—that word has come up twice in conversations over this past week. Some consider relationship or employment matters. I can not speak about any of these on the basis of confidentiality, but I can share about myself. So I will, and I will begin at the mid-point of the journey rather than the beginning.

I have formally given "provisional resignation" to the Board of Deacons at NPMC. I have used the term "provisional" with great intention. To me provisional means that I am willing to change the status of my employment at NPMC and that I am willing to exit if that is best. And in all honesty, it might be that exiting is for the best. While I have not been privy to the "in camera" board sessions where they are discussing pastoral resourcing, I get the sense that there will be initiatives to hire another pastor. But seriously, I know as much as most of you—which is nothing! We will hear more from Board chair Gordon very soon. In a very basic summary of what I mean when I say "provisional resignation":

1. There is no date set for the resignation. We will not set that date until a primary pastor hire has agreed to join NPMC. That could happen quickly or it might take a while. Until that time, I will serve the congregation as I have.

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<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Palmer interview of Munther Isaac in *The Christian Century* (October 2024), p. 48-53.

2. Provisional might mean a shifting of my pastoral duties, or it might mean exiting completely. Much will depend on the hiring process. I am committed, however, to not getting in the way of the new pastor. And this takes me to the “why” question—why a provisional resignation?

### **Slide: Patrick**

Look at this young chap. This picture is from a previous decade and persists on our web-site. Now I am a bit thinner up top and a bit wider around the middle. New ideas from a new pastor might take root without the specter of the traditions I received from Anita and Vern before her. Your relationships with a new pastor might flourish better without the old codger absorbing up some of the richest aspects of pastoral care which translate into a form of bonding. In the context of our biblical story, this want to be wise guy has been camping out in the manger area and soaking up space in the nativity grotto for over 17 years. My presence, and my salary cap, may be keeping other wise ones from joining us.

A voluntary resignation gives the NPMC Board permission to continue figuring out the pastoral needs of NPMC and its connections to community in correlation with our cash flow. A provisional resignation gives them time to do so knowing the shop is being managed. They won't need to fire me or ask for a reduction in my hours because in this “provisional resignation” I have already offered it. Following a new hire, any continued service for me to NPMC would be a new contract with different expectations. In all of this, what is best for Patrick?

Certainly, seeing the congregation through a pastoral hire is a passion I have carried the last year and a quarter. I love you guys. This mage cares for you and adores the Christ child I have seen in each of you. I treasure you even as I have given the best of my treasures to you. Attending to the transition, without micro managing it, is an extension of my affection for you. I have no plans to relocate. I have no intentions of new work. The biggest call I hear from God right now is to “create space”. So, that means in some way leaving Bethlehem to get out of the way for new magi who will bring new gifts who will be a blessing to our congregation and community. This, then, takes us to the final application of the biblical story of the day—the NPMC journey. And for that, I invite Board chair Gordon Peters forward to share. Gordon.

Patrick Preheim, pastor of Nutana Park Mennonite Church

### **Slide: Nutana Park Mennonite Church**

**NPMC Magi Journey:** (Gordon Speaks)