Guided by a Different Star

As the calendar turns and the church moves from the glow of Christmas into the light of Epiphany, Matthew's story of the Magi invites a searching question for us in 2026: What star are we following, and whose road are we walking? The wise travelers arrive in Bethlehem guided by a strange and gracious light, but the story does not end at the manger. After encountering the Christ child, they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod—and so, Matthew tells us, "they left for their own country by another road."

Epiphany is often imagined as a quiet scene of gifts and adoration. Yet at its heart is a dangerous choice: the Magi must decide whether to report back to a fearful ruler or to trust the holy disruption of God's guidance. They choose a different star and a different road. Their loyalty shifts from the powers that be to the fragile, world-changing presence of God-with-us. The story suggests that a real encounter with Christ rearranges our loyalties, reroutes our paths, and sometimes asks us to say no to what feels familiar, safe, or expected.

Many of our congregations in Florida are standing at their own Herod's gate as this new year begins. Some are discerning future pastoral leadership—wondering who will walk with them, preach the gospel among them, and help them navigate the next chapter. Others are wrestling with budgets, changing neighborhoods, aging buildings, and questions about sustainability and mission. Still others are exploring new ministries, partnerships, and forms of worship that do not look like "the way we've always done it." In each of these places, Christ is being revealed, and in each, the Spirit may whisper: "You cannot go back the same way you came."

As an Associate Conference Minister, walking alongside congregations in search and call and in congregational care, a holy pattern emerges again and again. When a church dares to follow a different star—to imagine new models of pastoral leadership, to share ministry with neighboring congregations, to repurpose a building for community use, to step more boldly into public witness—there is often both deep fear and deep freedom. Fear, because familiar paths feel safer, even when they are no longer life-giving. Freedom, because the gospel opens a road that is more honest, more just, and more aligned with God's dream for the community.

In 2026, perhaps Epiphany is inviting Florida congregations to ask three hard, faithful questions together:

First, what are our "Herods"? Where and with whom do we feel pressure to return and report instead of listening to the Spirit's warning? For some, Herod takes the form of nostalgia—an insistence that the church must look like it did in 1985. For others, Herod is institutional anxiety—fear of decline that leads to clinging rather than releasing. For still others, Herod appears as respectability, the quiet pressure not to be "too political," not to talk about race, immigration, or creation care, even when these are gospel concerns in our local communities. Naming our Herods does not mean hating the past or rejecting structure; it means being honest about the voices that demand allegiance at the expense of Christ's liberating call.

Second, what star are we actually following? Is it the star of survival at any cost? The star of comfort for a few? Or the star of Christ, who always draws the church outward—to the margins, to the vulnerable, to the places where light is most needed? For a congregation in pastoral transition, following Christ's star might mean widening the search to consider candidates from diverse racial, cultural, or generational backgrounds, trusting that the Spirit may send a leader whose story stretches and blesses the community. For congregations with underused buildings, following the star might mean opening space to a new church start, a community group, or a justice ministry that brings fresh life to familiar walls.

Third, what "another road" is the Spirit opening before us right now? Not a road we will walk someday when everything is settled, but a road we can begin to step onto this quarter, this season. Another road might mean entering shared ministry with another congregation—experimenting with joint worship, combined mission projects, or even shared pastoral leadership. It might mean reimagining church governance so that more voices and gifts are brought into the discernment process, including youth and people who are too often sidelined. It might mean committing to one clear act of public witness—partnering with a local organization, adopting a climate justice practice, or becoming Open and Affirming if you are not yet.

Choosing another road does not mean every congregation must follow the same path. The Magi each returned to "their own country"—their context, their people—but they did so changed by their encounter with Jesus and their refusal to serve Herod's fear. Likewise, each congregation has its own language, culture, gifts, and history. Epiphany does not erase those distinctives; it invites each church to ask: In our specific context, what does it look like to go home differently because we have met Christ again?

In this new year, may you have the courage to name the Herods that demand your loyalty, the clarity to see the star that truly belongs to Christ, and the trust to take even one step onto the "other road" the Spirit is opening. And know that you do not travel alone. As a Conference, we are bound together in covenant—congregations, clergy, and Conference staff—seeking to follow the same Light across diverse and changing landscapes.

May the God who guided the Magi guard your discernment.
May Christ, the Light of the world, illuminate your next faithful step.
May the Holy Spirit keep nudging us toward paths that serve love, justice, and joy in every corner of Florida.

Grace and peace to you on the journey,

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