

## “What Now?” (Matthew 2:12) Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2010

*[Seeing and picking up scroll]* Well, what have we here? Shall I open it up and see? *[opens scroll and reads]*

“We’re all packed. The camels are saddled up. My masters are ready to head back home. Or *almost* ready, I should say. At the moment, they are busy pouring over maps. It seems they plan to take a *different* road back to our country. I find that quite appropriate! Since arriving here in Bethlehem, we have become different. Life has become different. Our future has become different. So small wonder the road home will be different, too! At any rate, this delay gives me time to write down a few things. It’s been quite an adventure following the star! And now that the star is fading away, I want to capture what we’ve experienced before it, too, fades away.”

“But maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. First, an introduction. I, the author of this scroll, am the lowly scribe of three great wise men: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. I am writing this from the land of Judea, in a little town called Bethlehem, home of a young couple named Joseph and Mary. And why are we here? Because of the star I just mentioned. An amazing star appeared about two years ago. Caspar was the first to spot it. Melchior figured out its meaning. And Balthazar? He came up with the big idea: ‘Let’s go find out what all this means!’ Of course, the other two jumped at the chance! Such an amazing phenomenon! It had to mean the birth of a king – at the very least! So they planned our trip, prepared a caravan, purchased appropriate gifts, and off we went in search of **‘the child who was born king of the Jews.’**”

“All that seems like ancient history now! The long journey. The detour to Jerusalem. Learning that this star had been prophesied. Likewise, His birthplace here in Bethlehem – the birthplace of this One the Jews call ‘Messiah.’ Yes, it all seems like ancient history now. For we have experienced so much in the short time we have been here! And as we prepare to head home, how can I describe it? Nothing has turned out the way we expected! Nothing! We spotted a star heralding the birth of...a peasant child? We followed a star all that way to...this lowly house? We expected a king and a palace!”

“Yet strangely enough, *not* finding what we expected is what’s made such a difference! I mean, what would my masters have done if we *had* found a king? Knock on the door,

offer the gifts, worship the child and take off? I don't know. But being led to something so different from what we expected – that raised a lot of questions. It challenged preconceptions. It made these wise men think!“

“There was no denying the miraculous. We had the star, heralding the child's birth, guiding us to Him. And in Jerusalem, we read the ancient prophecies foretelling this child's birth. But still, all these signs and wonders for a peasant child? What kind of God does that? Truth be told, what kind of a God does anything? Ours at home don't do anything! But this God of the Jews – He's an active one! So involved in life! And so concerned about people – all people, even gentiles like us!”

“That was a revelation for these wise men! God's concern. But according to Joseph, this child came for all people – to save all people; to save us from our sins. That was another revelation! You see, it never occurred to us that we needed saving! It never occurred to us that we were sinners. We thought we were paragons of virtue! What a surprise to find out differently when Joseph showed us the Law and showed us how we really stand before God.”

“Then came another surprise – this time, a good one. Joseph explained that even though we are sinners, God sent us this child to be our Savior! And what a Savior! For Mary explained *how* Jesus would save us – that He would grow up, suffer, and die to atone for our sins in our place. Even the wise men had to think a while on that one! For again, what kind of God does that? Punish sins, sure. But atone for sins? Pay the price for sins? So He can offer us forgiveness? What kind of a God does that? What kind of a God loves so deeply – so deeply in fact, that He'd come in person to save us? For that was another thing Mary told us. Joseph backed her up. And not only did we have the star as proof and all those ancient prophecies, we had the child Himself! And let me just state for the record: even with their vast knowledge, nothing prepared my masters for this child. Gazing upon Jesus' face, you could just see His divinity. Gazing into His eyes, you could just see His grace. This virgin-born child, this long-awaited child, this Redeemer, this Savior, this Son of God – in Him, we found something greater than we ever expected – so much greater that as we prepare to head home again, all we can do is ask ourselves, ‘*What now?*’ We've seen our Savior. We've met the Messiah. With His tiny hands, Jesus has grasped us and made us His own. We will always carry Him in our hearts. So what now?”

“One thing’s for sure. We can’t go back to life the way it was! That’s why I find it so appropriate that we have to **“return to our own country by a different road.”** Of course we do! The road to Bethlehem was the way of the seeker. God led us along. We had no clue what we were even seeking. The road we’ll travel home is different. It is the way of the finder. Now that we’ve found Jesus, He has grasped us forever. No way can Caspar head home thinking, ‘That was interesting, but hardly life-changing.’ Of course it’s life-changing! No way can Melchior head home thinking, ‘That was inspiring, but not enough to challenge my old beliefs.’ Of course it’s challenged his old beliefs! No way can Balthazar head home thinking, ‘That was enjoyable, but it’s time to get back to the same-old-same-old.’ That is precisely what we cannot do! This encounter with Christ has changed everything! It’s exploded our preconceptions, shattered our beliefs, called into question everything we once thought they knew. The same-old-same-old is gone forever. And what do we have in its place? This little Christ child – this little Jesus – and in Him, we have greater knowledge than we ever imagined, greater hope than we ever dreamed possible. We have a greater vision of God, and what matters, and our own human worth. We’ve gotten back infinitely more than what we had – too much more to be able to go back to the same old- thing. So it really is fitting that the we have to **“return to our own country by a different road.”** We are different. *Life* is different. The *journey before us* is different. So we will travel this different *road*, trusting the God who led us here, depending on Him each step of the way, and always asking Him: *What now?*”

Here the manuscript breaks off. But surely the message is clear. In fact, as we begin 2010, the same question stands before us: *What now?* A lot has happened in the past year. A lot has changed – in us as individuals, in us as a congregation. That’s always the case. Some years we just experience it more than others – like this past year. But as we begin 2010, the fact remains: we are different, *life* is different, the *journey before us* is different. There is no going back to the same-old-same-old. And that is why we have to ask: *What now?*

This need not be a frightening question. Actually, it can be exciting. God is faithful. His possibilities are endless. He **“is able to do abundantly far more than all we ask or imagine!”** Times of turmoil can lead to times of renewal. Often they have. But whether they *will* lead to a time of renewal here, in our lives, depends on how we seek the answer to this question: *What now?*

There’s no point trying to answer it on our own. Human wisdom just won’t suffice. *“What now?”* is a question for God – first and foremost for God. So as we begin this new year, we need to draw even closer to God. That means

immersing ourselves in **prayer**. That means delving into **God's Word**. That means **refocusing on Christ** – on what honors Him, what pleases Him, what promotes His work, what fulfills His will. If we want to take a road into the future that's not just different but better, we need to draw even closer to God. That's an essential part of asking: *What now?*

To do that effectively, there's probably also some need for **soul-searching**. I mean, looking back over the past year, who of us can say that our words and deeds have always honored Christ – or even sought to? Who of us can say our attitudes have always pleased Christ – or even sought to? And however well-intentioned we may have been, who of us can say we've only promoted His work, never hindered it; always pursued His will, never ignored it. If we *can* say that, there's all the more reason for soul-searching! I'm sure all of us have had some rude awakenings this past year. People we considered friends turned out not to be. Truths we considered sacred turned out not to be. Situations we considered unthinkable turned out not to be. Yes, there have been some rude awakenings, not to mention some deep wounds, and it's easy to see how others have been responsible for them. But how about ourselves? Or how about our reactions? What do we see there? Only through some genuine soul-searching can we really see where we are...and how we got here...and what needs to change for us to take a better road into the future. This also is part of asking: *What now?*

But let's not get stuck there! Just as confession leads to absolution, let our soul-searching lead us to the Lord's **promises** – to a deeper trust in them and dependence on them! For if "*What now?*" is a question for God, surely His answer comes through His promises – the answer for us as individuals and as a congregation. The key is really claiming His promises! I mean, how many times have we heard, "**My grace will be sufficient for you; my power is made perfect in weakness**"? Plenty of times! But to claim the promise, cling to it, draw upon Christ's grace and power – ah, that already is a step forward on God's new and different road toward our future! How many times have we heard the promise, "**Come unto Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.**"? Plenty of times! But to claim the promise, cling to it, draw upon its comfort – that, too, is a step forward on God's new and different road! So it will be with all the Lord's promises. In them, most of all, we can seek the answer to our question: "*What now?*"

The answer may not come immediately. But hasn't the Lord said, "**I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.**"? That's what we count on as we step out in faith this year of our Lord 2010. Like the wise men before us, we may be traveling by a different road, but the Lord is with us. That is what matters. The Lord is with us to guide and strengthen us; to comfort and encourage us; to work in us and through us with His love. And you know what? This in itself is a pretty great answer to our question: "*What now?*" Amen.