

The Courage to Change Direction

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on January 4th, 2026, (Matthew 2:1-12))

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Three or maybe more, men are watching the skies and see something unusual, consulting all the books and guides they know, they believe this is significant. So significant their lives take a different direction. They pack up their lives, their camels and begin a journey that will take up to a couple of years and take them to foreign lands and in the end turn their world upside down.

Without them our lives too would have taken a different direction. The journey of the three wise men, the Magi marks the moment that God's love is revealed to the entire world, not just those living in Palestine at the time of Jesus' birth. We call this the Epiphany.

Epiphany is celebrated on Jan 6 by many Orthodox Christians around the world, it is on that day they celebrate the birth of Jesus because they understand his birth, to be the moment, God's love is revealed to the entire world.

Epiphany means a sudden appearing, a manifestation. The unveiling of God and God's love for the world. It marks the moment when God's love, peace and justice is revealed to and for the entire world, for all time, for everyone, for every place.

Today I want to explore the courage of the Magi as they followed that star that they had observed.

The Magi travelled from the East to the West. The most probably were Persian, from East Persia or modern-day Iraq/Iran.

Their journey would have been difficult, leaving family and friends behind, going through countries and places where they did not know the language, the customs or the rules. Traversing all kinds of terrain – desert sands, winding rivers. Facing all kinds of weather – the sun beating down, cold nights, snow, storms. Encountering all kinds of people – some who no doubt assisted them on their journey, but also others who wished them harm. And cranky camels, stubborn, who would only move when they were good and ready.

They would have been full of questions, but had few answers. They would have been full of wonder, but no real certainty and many times would have wondered if this was 'all folly'.¹

They brought with them what they thought was appropriate, three precious gifts, not really knowing how they would be received.

They courageously crossed many boundaries in their search for truth.

So, they made their way to the halls of power, not knowing what they would find, what kind of reception they would receive.

¹ From the poem by T S Eliot, 'Journey of the Magi'

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Strangers making their way to the most powerful man in the country, a man who was known to be a violent and tyrannical ruler, would they be welcome or quickly shown the door? They entered the home of a man who would do anything to protect his hold on power.

Nervously they asked their questions and told their story. Did it seem fanciful to this ruler called Herod? What did he make of their story, their journey, their search?

Could they read what was really going on with Herod – did they see a man who was afraid of change, afraid of losing control to another such was his need for power? Could they smell his fear, could they see through his pretences and understand his duplicitous nature? Did they know he was ‘milking’ them for whatever information he could, so he could take matters into his own hands at a later date? Did they know he would do whatever he could to protect his reign, his power, his privilege and his ego?

And they left the palace with the courage to finish what they had started and follow that star until it stopped. Did they enter that house with trepidation? Did they wonder what would happen, what kind of welcome they would receive? And yet they went in with their gifts, and their lives were changed forever. They had found the object of their search, and they were changed by their encounter with God’s revelation of love, in the face of a child.

With the same courage they had to pack up their lives and follow a star, they then followed the message they received in a dream. A dream that told them that to go back to Herod would be dangerous, but maybe they were not surprised by that, given the man they had already encountered. Courageously they go in another direction, the go the long way home, a journey that probably took them in a slightly different direction and took longer than their initial journey. Symbolic perhaps of the spiritual change they had undergone, a different direction for them, a new understanding that would change the way they lived.

This new way home would have been risky. Were they worried that at any point Herod would realise he had been tricked and be after them as well? Clearly, they had decided they wanted no part of Herod’s cruel plan to cause harm to others.

When they arrived home, they probably faced more risk, telling the story of what they had encountered to family and friends who may have ridiculed them, but knowing that this story needed to be shared and celebrated.

Do we have the courage of the Magi? Will we be like the Magi – noticing grace, bringing kindness, searching for truth? What will we do with the light we have received in the person of Jesus? How will we respond to the Epiphany we have received in the birth of Jesus? Will we have the courage to leave that encounter by another way, to go in a different direction.

We stand on the threshold of a New Year.

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What might we do differently as individuals in 2026 as we continue on our journey of faith? You were given a star when you came in today – why don't you write that aspiration on your star and keep it with you for the rest of the year.

The challenge to be courageous in our faith is for us as a community. What will Footscray Baptist Church do differently as a church community in 2026? Do we have the courage to take a slightly different direction? To do something differently? To find new ways to share the love and light with our community. Next week at our Special Church Meeting will have a chance to make such a choice about the future of this place.

The story of the Magi demonstrates for us that we can take a different direction, that such a choice might be uncomfortable at times, that it will be risky but ultimately that it will change the world and reveal the love of God to those around us.

So, as the road ahead might be unclear, we pray that God will keep us listening. As the way might be risky, we pray that God will give us the courage we need.

May the light of Christ guide us,
May love grow stronger than fear,
May we become strangers who bring kindness – and the neighbours who receive it with joy.
Lead us by another road. Amen.²

² Prayer by Gary Hopkins found at [Epiphany \(ABC\) - GaryHopkins.net](http://Epiphany(ABC)-GaryHopkins.net)