

God's Invitation to Connect: Connecting with Self  
Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12  
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### **Isaiah 60:1-6 (NRSV)**

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

<sup>2</sup>For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

<sup>3</sup>Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

<sup>4</sup>Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

<sup>5</sup>Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

<sup>6</sup>A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

## Matthew 2:1-12 (NLT)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, <sup>2</sup>“Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.”

<sup>3</sup> King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

<sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

<sup>6</sup> ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,  
are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,  
for a ruler will come from you  
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. <sup>8</sup> Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

<sup>9</sup> After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! <sup>11</sup> They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

<sup>12</sup> When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

It's that time of year. For New Year's Resolutions. Or for already breaking new year's resolutions. Guess what percentage of Americans make them. 60%. Or 40%. I found both on the internet. And you know if they are on the internet, somehow both are true.

Here are the three most popular new year's resolutions for 2019:

- Diet or eat healthier
- Exercise more
- Lose weight

I'm seeing a trend! Of course, a New Year's resolution means that we have taken a good hard look at ourselves to figure out who we are, and what we want to change about our lives.

Today's sermon is about this very thing. The theme for this month is God's invitation to connect, and today we're thinking about connecting with ourselves. You can't very well connect with ourselves if we don't understand who we are.

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We're sitting here in worship, so the aspect of who we are that I'm going to focus on today is on whom we worship. This has been an important question for Christians, but it doesn't necessarily put us in the best light. We don't always do the best job of remembering to worship God rather than other options.

John Calvin, one of our most important theologians, had this to say:

“Human nature is a perpetual factory of idols.” (*Institutes, Book 1, XI*)

A factory of idols!!! Calvin says our hearts and minds long to worship, but they are quick to stray away from God and construct other idols to pledge our allegiance to.

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When we turn to our New Testament passage for today, we see people manufacturing all sorts of idols. It's a story that we've already sung about, "We Three Kings of Orient Are."

But before we dig into who's worshiping what idols in this story, first some mythbusting. I want to massacre four misconceptions.

1. They are not kings. Even though we just sang We Three Kings. That idea came about in the Middle Ages. Matthew uses the Greek word Magi, from which we get magician. Wise Men. Astrologers. Scholars. There is a Hawaiian Pidgin English Bible which calls them "Da Smart Guys who know plenny bout da stars." Use one of these, but not kings.
2. There are not necessarily three. Again, even though we just sang "We Three Kings." We don't know how many there are, but the Bible doesn't say three. Three gifts, yes, but not necessarily three men.
3. The "star of wonder" that we just sang about wasn't a star. [Barry, I should have listened to you when we were picking today's hymns!] It might have been a comet or a configuration of planets. Or, as one commentator put it, "Matthew is making a theological point and does not intend to compete with contemporary astrophysicists."
4. They didn't get there at the manger, despite virtually every nativity scene you've ever seen. Matthew says they came to a house. It must have been between forty days to two years after Jesus' birth.

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So now, let's go back to the question of who the characters worship. First, King Herod. The idol that he starts manufacturing is power. Herod wants to hold onto his power so badly that he's willing to lie to the wise men, to use the religious leaders, and, eventually, to kill all the little boys in Bethlehem. There is nothing good about worshiping power; you might have heard that it corrupts. Sometimes absolutely.

Who is it that the leading priests and the teachers of religious law are worshiping? Now of course they are supposed to be worshiping the God of Israel—but take it from me. Religious leaders' hearts are just as likely to be a factory of idols as everyone else's. In our best moments, we want to worship Jesus, but we are not always at our best.

It makes me read between the lines of the passage and wonder if the religious leaders have made an idol out of security. Matthew doesn't say it directly, but it seems to me if a guy who's idolizing power asks you about where his competition is going to be born, you might get suspicious. But they don't make any waves. They give him his answer, and move along. Safely. Securely. Wonderfully...especially since safety and security might just be their idols.

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Then we have the wise men. I learned this week that Magi were not exactly the good guys back in the day. In Israel they were considered idolators! They didn't just follow the stars—they worshiped the stars. In fact, every other reference to any Magi in the New Testament is negative.

But OUR magi...you know, “da smart guys who know plenny bout da stars”...they may have come to Bethlehem worshiping the stars, but when they meet Jesus--when they see the gracious love of God incarnate in a baby—everything changes.

They stop worshiping the stars and they start worshiping the Creator of the stars, who shows grace in coming to us as the babe in Bethlehem. They are touched by the grace of knowing that even though we are factories of idols, God still reaches down to us in Jesus Christ. Even though we might worship power, or security, or stars, God shows grace to us. While we were still sinners, God sent his son to earth, for us, to save us from our sins.

After the Wise Men experienced this grace, in gratitude they went home a different way.

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We have the chance to go home a different way, too. We can go home today with a changed view of who we are in Jesus Christ, and how we want to worship him.

We may not worship stars, but our hearts are factories of idols, too. Power or security might ring a bell for you. Maybe finding the right relationship is an idol for you. Maybe it's wealth or career success. Maybe having your kids or

grandkids turn out perfectly is your idol. Maybe it's your intelligence or your need for adventure or even your passion for your favorite college basketball team.

Think about what idol you might be worshiping, rather than worshiping the God of Jesus Christ. Then think about what new New Year's resolution you might make. Eating healthier, losing weight, and exercising more are great resolutions—but they might not shift you toward worshiping God instead of whatever particular idols your heart has manufactured.

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To help spur you on toward another resolution for the new year, we are passing out Star Words. You might remember that we did these last year.

We are praying that God will use these gifts as an opportunity for you to be open to where God is breaking into your life, just as the wise men looked for God's breaking into the world by following the star and discovering Jesus.

During the offering, we'll be passing baskets of words. Please take a star – any star, don't try to find a particular word, the word you draw will pick you! Then consider how the word might lead to a resolution that will help you move away from idols and worship God more faithfully. You might get a word like, [pick a couple of examples].

Perhaps you could tape your star to your refrigerator or bathroom mirror and when you see it, remember to be prepared for the Divine to be revealed to you, wherever your journey may take you. It can be a tangible, clear sign of God's presence in the midst of all of the busyness of life.

Happy New Year! God bless you in 2019—and through you, bless the world. Amen.