

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Reference Point

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Show of hands, who here has ever been out orienteering? Oddly enough, it's been a rather useful skill for me over the years. I was first introduced to the practice when we were living in South Africa. At some point the school I attended had a trip to a nature reserve. We got to go hiking, there was an obstacle course, we rappelled and ziplined, learned about plants and insects, and we were taught orienteering!

What is orienteering? It is an activity that involves the use of maps and a compass in order to find your way. It's used in hiking and camping, canoeing and sailing, flying, as well as several other hobbies and activities. There are even orienteering competitions where people see who can get from one point to another the quickest, usually through difficult and unfamiliar territory.

As I mentioned, this skill has proven to be very useful over the years and I highly recommend learning it! One of the places orienteering is particularly useful is in the Boundary Waters, or any wilderness area really. I brought one of my [Boundary Waters maps](#) with me today to help illustrate this. Here we have a topographical map of an area of the Boundary Waters that I am familiar with.

Looks like a bunch of weird lines and symbols, right? Well, most of the lines indicate elevation, so if you learn to read this map you can get a sense of the hills in the area. Sometimes you can also get a sense of where bays and other lake features are too. That can be trickier though as lakeshores in the Boundary Waters can all look very similar to one another given the general uniformity of the fauna (it's all pine trees)!

Now you're probably starting to see why this activity is called orienteering. With a map and compass we can orient ourselves in our immediate surroundings. We do that by looking at this map, comparing it to our environmental reference points, and determining where we are in the world. We can do this because we use reference points: This map tells me that the largest hill in this area is here, there's an island over there and a large bay behind me, which means I am somewhere here.

This same skill is used in high-tech ways too. With three reference points (cell towers), a cell phone's location can be determined through its signal strength and triangulation. Now despite its high-tech uses today, orienteering is actually an ancient skill, one the magi likely employed on their journey from the East to Bethlehem.

Now, we don't know what sort of maps or reference points the magi used, apart from one anyway. The star. But travelling any distance at that time meant having several different means of finding your way. Using the stars would have been an easy means for men whose lives involved the study of astronomy and astrology. The magi uses their reference points to make their way to Israel, once in Jerusalem they rely on other reference points, the prophets of old. But using the means at hand, especially the work of God in the star, they orient themselves to Jesus. This orientation is further emphasized once they arrive at the manger.

Coming upon the Christ-child these men deliver poignant gifts that illustrate their expectations and their own orientation towards this child. Gold for a king, frankincense for worship, and myrrh in preparation for his death. The magi reveal much in their journey and arrival.

What are your reference points as you journey through life? How do you orient yourself when you feel lost? I don't know about you, but I'm feeling pretty disoriented lately. War and conflict in the middle east and eastern europe. An increasingly devastating climate crisis impacting the world. Deep, seemingly insurmountable, divisions within our society. A general lack of compassion or empathy in the world. This is not the world as I understand God made it to be. We are not the people God made us to be.

So how do we reorient ourselves? What are the reference points we rely on to find our way back to the Way? Epiphany can give us some clues. The magi trusted in the work of God as they saw it in the world around them. They looked for clues as to how God was entering human reality and they learned of the birth of a new king, a different kind of king. They wouldn't figure out how different until they arrived to find him in a manger rather than a palace.

And those gifts! Those God-inspired, spirit-fueled gifts! These magi orienting themselves to a divine-king who took on human flesh and form in order to join human reality, even the reality of death. Did they know these reference points when they set out? One or two, perhaps, but they set out nonetheless, trusting that God would continue to provide them direction, give them reference points to make their way to the one who is the Way.

Are you feeling disoriented? Lost in the wilderness? Does the future look bleak? Let's reorient ourselves. Let's look around us for the work of God. For the star that will lead us to Christ. Reconsider your reference points. Are they the sort that will point you to God and the Way? Or are your reference points leading you elsewhere?

Those magi didn't make the trip alone either! They went as a group. And they didn't rely solely upon their own knowledge and insight! They learned from others; they heard the words of the prophets which led them to Bethlehem.

We aren't making our journeys alone either. We have community and connection as reference points. Where in the topography of our lives are the healthy connections, the deep and authentic communities? Who can we learn from? What reference points have we not considered? What can we learn from the prophets? From the Gospels? From each other's perspectives on the same?

The world around us is ripe for Epiphany, for reorientation. Our lives are ripe for it too. God is at work in the world around you, calling you to the Way, giving you the reference points you need. Let's walk there together, my siblings in Christ, with the Cross at our fore. Leading us into the Way of love and grace, justice, and peace. Leading us into the Kingdom and kin-dom of God. Amen.