

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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January 6, 2019
Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

A Star for All the World

Today is the 12th day of Christmas. Being the 12th day, it is also the last day of Christmas in the Christian calendar. Now I know that there are some who like Christmas so much that they can let it linger well into the new year—maybe even until the frenzy of Valentines Day supplants it. But for most, the Christmas season has come to an end already or it ends today.

It would seem that in the North American cultural context, the 12 days of Christmas are experienced more as a countdown to Christmas, rather than beginning with Christmas Day itself which is actually what's meant by the 12 days of Christmas traditionally.

In any case, today, January 6, is the day of Epiphany when we're called to remember the last act of the Christmas drama—the story of the magi from the east, also known as the kings or wise men. The manger scenes that we set up each year with the animals, and shepherds along with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus would be incomplete if they didn't also have the wise men, and perhaps their camels, presenting to the baby Jesus three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. By the way, as you heard the story again today, did you notice that there is no mention of three as the number of magi or wise men? There is no mention of how many there were in the caravan from the east. What is mentioned is that they brought with them three gifts.

In spite of our nativity scenes that we love so much and that are indeed a wonderful reminder of the Christmas story, no one really knows when it is that the wise men came west, following that new star in the night sky. Some scholars have suggested that it happened weeks or even many months after Jesus was born. It's in Matthew's gospel that we read about this event, whereas the other events that we read about—the travel to Bethlehem for the census, Jesus being born in a stable, and the appearance of the angel to beckon the shepherds to come and witness to the birth—are all included in Luke's gospel. Luke makes no mention of wise men bearing gifts, and Matthew makes no mention of anything else other than that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Each of these gospel writers included details that they considered significant as the story of Jesus' life begins. So let's take a closer look at this Epiphany story that Matthew records for us.

Up until this point in the story of Jesus, his birth is a fairly quiet event. Although it happened in the hecticness of the little town of Bethlehem that was overrun with people due to the governmental census going on, the birth of a baby would have gone largely unnoticed—just another one of those events that happens in the midst of human life cycles. And those shepherds who were summoned to Bethlehem would not have had much credibility among the general population. So even though they certainly would have been sharing their miraculous encounter with the holy, it would not have spread as a necessarily trustworthy news story. So again, once Jesus was born and stabilized, life for Joseph, Mary and the infant would have gone on like it did for most any other couple with their first child—in the shadows or on the sidelines.

The first of two notable aspects of this story is that this star in the night sky was observed by those who were far from Bethlehem and indeed far from Israel. These wise men were also known as astrologers, those who studied the heavens and the night sky who would have surely noticed when there was something new and different in the dome of the night sky. We don't know what religious

affiliation they might have had, but they were most certainly not part of the Jewish people. That this event of God's gift of Jesus' birth is being noted by those who are from so far away is significant in that it makes clear that this event is for more than a people—the Jews. It is an event for the world—so much so that it catches the attention of those who might as well be a world away from Israel.

These travelers from the east are not just anybody, they are learned wise men who know there is something to be discovered in solving the mystery of the star. They're able to deduce that because the star is shining over the land of the Jews that it must be pointing to the king of the Jews. They also know enough that when they arrive in Jerusalem, the capital city, this is where the king of the Jews would be located. It is in this arrival at the seat of power that the second notable aspect of this story comes into play with their encounter with King Herod.

King Herod was what you might call a big fish in a small pond. And he was not a beneficent big fish. Rather he was a man who was in his position to exercise power and authority over the Jewish people who were living under Roman occupation. Herod was in many ways a puppet king whose foremost purpose was to keep the Jews in their place subject to the ultimate Roman authority. So Herod had all the power of Rome behind him when he was doing his job of keeping the peace and suppressing anything that smacked of unrest, let alone rebellion. So while he retained the title of King of the Jews, he was a corrupt and fearmongering leader who was looking out for himself before the people he ruled.

It should be no surprise then when these visitors from the east arrive inquiring as to where the King of the Jews had been born that Herod would have been alarmed and dismayed by such an inquiry. We read, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him. . . ." (Mt. 2:3) This "all Jerusalem with him" would have been all of those who served Herod and who were beholden to him. We might say that they were those who were in cahoots with him.

But being the shrewd, even diabolical man he that he was, he gets those Jewish leaders of the Jerusalem temple together to find out from them where this Messiah was to be born. They consult their scrolls and announce that it is Bethlehem where this is to occur. By the way, isn't it interesting that these Jewish leaders had not noticed what the wise men had noticed in the night sky? Could it be that they were so enmeshed in their own situation of living under Herod's rule that they had lost their ability to pay attention to the signs that God placed before them?

King Herod then does what he has done throughout his reign, he attempts to get the wise men to collude with him in finding this baby Messiah so that he can do what he needs to do to eliminate the threat to his own power and authority. "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." (Mt. 2:8)

We know what happens after that. Those wise men were probably already astute enough to be more than suspicious of the motives of this King Herod. But just to be certain, they're warned in a dream to return to their homeland by an alternate route, thereby avoiding any further contact with Herod.

Now we didn't read on into the story, but let me just say that if we had, we would have learned that Herod, in his fury of not identifying the Christ child, orders the deaths of all "the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." (Mt. 2:16) And just to keep this part of the story clear, Jesus' father Joseph was warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt in order to avoid the sword of Herod.

With this opening story in Matthew's gospel, the stage is set for all the events that follow. Like so many other events recounted in the Bible, this opening scene in Matthew is one that is filled with drama, mystery, intrigue, and foreshadows so much of what will unfold in the rest of the pages of this gospel.

Right from the get-go, Matthew makes it crystal clear that while Jesus is most definitely the fulfillment of the promises of a Messiah that had long been part of the Jewish understanding of God's work in the world, this Messiah who has come in the person of Jesus is so much more than what had been anticipated. First and foremost, this Messiah is for Jews and Gentiles alike. Since Gentiles were understood to be anyone who is not Jewish, that means that this Jesus is the Messiah for the whole world. This is a radical idea that takes many years to take hold and become a central part of what it means to be Christian.

Two thousand years later, I think we're pretty good at saying that we understand Jesus to be God's gift to the whole world. Where I think we're still challenged in our day is in our striving to be open to new and different expressions of Christian faith that may look very different from the ways we're accustomed to living and expressing Christian faith. Perhaps what we can learn from the wise ones of old is to look up. To look up and see beyond the familiar to signs of God's love that may be there hidden in plain sight.

The other way in which Matthew sets the stage in this opening story is to make clear that Jesus' coming was not something that set well with the establishment of his day. Whether it be the King Herods who represent that organizational and institutional structures that are designed to keep people in their place and to protect the power of those who have it disproportionately, or whether it be the religious structures that are also in place to preserve the status quo. What Matthew is saying from the outset is that Jesus coming radically changes the world and its structures. Jesus levels the field, so to speak, so that God's love and grace and blessings are available to the whole world with no exceptions. When we come to understand that in our day, we may discover that our faith is calling us to be counter cultural as well.

After today—Epiphany that is—the story of Jesus picks up with his adult life and ministry. Next Sunday our focus will be on Jesus' baptism. We who know the story know that Jesus will have run-ins with the powers that be again and again. And we know that culminates in what happens in Holy Week when Jesus goes the full distance for us on the cross.

Before he goes that distance, he gave his followers a wonderful gift in what we now call the Lord's Supper when he broke bread and shared the cup on the night before his death. One of the names for this sacrament is Eucharist, a word that simply means thanksgiving. What a wonderful thing it is that we, as followers of Jesus, regularly take the time to enter into this sacrament of thanksgiving for the wonderful and amazing gift of God in his son Jesus. Thanks be to God for the wonders and signs that we see at the outset of his story—stars, shepherds, wise ones, angels—that point to this amazing love and grace given to us and to all the world through the Christ child .