

Epiphany 2022 Matthew 2:1-12

This past week I have had several conversations, as you do at the turn of the year, about how this year, and really the past two years, have seemed simultaneously to fly by and drag on forever. So it feels like just yesterday and also an eternity ago that some of us and others from the synod were preparing to travel to the Holy Land to see, among other things, the church that honors the birthplace of Christ. The churches at the supposed locations of gospel events are not my favorite places in Israel and Palestine; they are always crowded, we don't know for certain those are even the places where the events they commemorate actually happened, and besides that, many of the buildings don't feel historic because they are relatively new, even very modern architecture. Many original shrines didn't survive the centuries of warfare as different world powers and religions gained and lost control over an area that is sacred to multiple faith traditions. The Church of the Nativity is one of the few really old buildings, because although the fourth century church on that site was destroyed, it was rebuilt in the sixth century and has survived more or less intact since then. Legend has it that Persian invaders who conquered the area spared the church because of the depiction of the magi above its entrance: in the relief, the magi are dressed like Persian priests, so the soldiers saw themselves in the story that the church celebrates.

Matthew's gospel is a declaration that those who may be perceived as outsiders are not only included but integral to God's loving work in the world. The magi arrive from a distant land and make an honest mistake when they go to Herod's palace and ask to see the newborn king. Normally, logically, the new prince should have been born to the sitting royal family in Jerusalem. Jesus' birth into a poor family out in the suburbs confounds expectations. Matthew doesn't mention angelic armies or visiting shepherds; so according to Matthew, the newborn Jesus had remained under the radar until the magi showed up and started asking questions. The chief priests and scribes are able to name Bethlehem as the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah, but they don't seem to have been checking regularly to see if that prophecy had yet been fulfilled. That the first ones to figure it out are foreign gentile astrologers comes as a surprise to everyone. Matthew later implies that the star appeared two years prior to the magi's arrival; either it took them that long to decipher its meaning or it took them that long to travel from wherever in the East they lived. Either way, the ruling king and the people of Judea had been oblivious for years.

Herod reacts as one in power who feels threatened typically would: under false pretenses he tries to weasel information out of the magi and, when they fail to report back to him, orders the murder of all the babies in Bethlehem, just to be safe. For this reason, the holy family flees to Egypt, so Jesus himself becomes a refugee, an outsider in his own story. Of course, Herod didn't need to worry about Jesus deposing him by wielding political power; Jesus wasn't going to be that kind of king. Plus disease killed Herod before any of his imagined adversaries could. But Matthew paints an unflattering if accurate portrait of human nature where the King of Israel hears that the prophesied Messiah of Israel has been born, and his first instinct is to kill him. Then again, we could summarize the gospel by saying that God came to be with humanity, and humanity didn't stop until we hung God on a cross—the very outcome that the magi's gifts of funeral incense and embalming oil foreshadowed.

Through the story of the magi, Matthew tells us that the good news of God's incarnation is for everyone—not just for those who may expect it for themselves, but also for those whom nobody expects. That's why I appreciate the beautiful irony—whether historically accurate or only a legend—that the ancient church built to celebrate the nativity survived because its art preserved the revelation of Jesus' birth not to the king or priests or even ordinary residents of his own nation and religion but to heathens from far away. Epiphany means *revelation*, and the revelation of God's incarnation to those who checked none of the expected boxes is both an invitation and challenge for us: When we simply don't feel like God could possibly love us, Epiphany shows us that God most certainly does. When we can't see how God could possibly love *someone else*, Epiphany shows us that God absolutely loves them, too, and calls us to do likewise.

Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem stable and the star's guidance to his unlikely worshippers broke through the barriers of a world that was, and maybe always will be, deeply divided. After all, 2000 years later, Bethlehem is cut off from Jerusalem by a literal wall, and the people who live there are still persecuted. But the God who chose to begin a human life by inviting strangers to cross borders intends a better way of living than what we can envision for ourselves. May we experience our own Epiphany, seeing God reveal the way forward to us and trusting God's light to help us walk that way.