

## Epiphany 2023 Matthew 2:1-12

This year I picked out some Christmas cards at Barnes & Noble mainly for the artwork—a bird on a snowy, silver leaf tree branch. The message inside is a wish for the beauty of nature to inspire peace and joy throughout the new year. That is a very fitting message for me to send, because I am usually most inspired when I'm in nature, so much so that I try to make a walk in the woods a regular part of my preparation for Sunday preaching. Still, when I started writing in those cards, I wondered if they weren't "Christmasy" enough—religious or "churchy" enough—to be coming from a pastor. But then I re-read Matthew's gospel for today and decided maybe they were OK after all.

We had a few options for what to do with today liturgically. We could have celebrated today as the First Sunday of Christmas, or the festival of the Naming of Jesus. But we chose to transfer Epiphany, which is always January 6th, the end of the 12 days of Christmas, to this morning. The Western Church calls the visit of the magi the Epiphany—the great revelation of Jesus to the Gentile world, but we also tend to think of this event as simply Matthew's version of the Christmas story—no angels, no shepherds, but instead the magi and the star.

We pastors feel contractually obligated to mention the things that the magi were not. We'll sing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" in just a couple of minutes, but scripture does not tell us that there were three of them—only three gifts; and scripture does not tell us they were kings—although it makes for a nice metaphor for the rulers of earthly kingdoms to bow to the infant who represents the reign of the kingdom of God; and we don't know exactly where they came from—only that it was somewhere east of Bethlehem. We might even be reluctant, by our modern standards, to call them *wise men*; maybe if we think of them as astronomers that title would fit, but they were probably more like astrologers, and we tend not to equate "wisdom" with reading horoscopes.

What Matthew *is* careful to tell us is that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, a suburb of Jerusalem, home to King Herod, the Temple, and all the chief priests and scribes...yet even though this birth happened right next door, in the place where the prophets had said it would happen, and even though a star miraculously appeared over the exact location of the holy family, everybody who should have been on the lookout for the birth of the long-awaited Messiah still missed it. We don't know whether God chose to reveal the birth of Jesus only to these specific visitors from the East or whether that star, which behaved so irregularly, was visible to everyone, but nobody else could interpret what it meant. Either way, it's not Herod, who technically was the King of the Jews, who finds the newborn Jesus; it's not the chief priests

and the scribes, the religious professionals who are best educated in scripture who find the newborn Jesus; Matthew doesn't mention shepherds, so it's not even random citizens of the nation of Israel who find the newborn Jesus; Instead it's these foreign magi—Gentiles who aren't from 'round those parts.

Of the four evangelists, Matthew's gospel makes the greatest effort to portray Jesus' Jewish roots, tracing his lineage back through the major players of Israel's history. Then he introduces characters, like the wise men from the East, who are *not* part of Israel, but who nevertheless are included in God's unfolding story of redemption. We assume this was because Matthew's community was made up primarily of Jewish Christians who were grappling with what it meant to welcome Gentile Christians into fellowship. Historically, the Christian church has looked to Matthew's gospel and the Epiphany in particular as a point of entry for everyone who did not belong to the people of Israel to be included with God's chosen people. In other words, this story is good news for us, because it means that Jesus was God's gift not just to Israel but to us as well. But once we decided that we were on the inside, we skipped right to appointing ourselves gatekeepers and defining who is on the outside—even though the magi should confound that way of thinking.

As Christians, we can get a little judgmental with people who call themselves “spiritual” but not “religious”...yet the very first people to worship Jesus didn't practice Jesus' religion. We get grumpy when people say they feel the presence of God more readily in nature than in a church...yet it was the people who were looking up in the night sky and paying attention to the stars who were first drawn to Jesus—not those who spent every day in the Temple. We sometimes focus so narrowly on the way God works in the methods, institutions, and places we expect that we can miss, or even doubt that God is at work outside of our expectations—even though God chose to reveal Jesus to these magi who were outsiders because of ethnicity, religion, and nationality. The borders and limits that we place on God...we keep finding God on the other side of them.

At our Longest Night service, I said that Christmas can feel like it's not meant for us when loss, grief, or estrangement obscure the joy of the season; yet even then, the promise is that Emmanuel comes to us, too, right in the midst of that struggle. Epiphany challenges us to believe that not only does Emmanuel come to us, regardless of our circumstances, but Emmanuel comes to them, whomever we would call “them” regardless of their circumstances. To miss seeing God at work beyond our expectations is to miss the star shining right in front of us. May this Epiphany be a revelation for us of the God whose love knows no bounds.