

Epiphany

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 2:1-12

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While in our culture we're busy taking down and storing the lights and dragging the tree out to the curb and weaning ourselves off of holiday delicacies, in other parts of the world the grandest celebrations are still fresh. Christmas Day already seems like it was an eternity ago, but Epiphany was just this past Thursday, and for many residents of the world it is the larger celebration. Gifts are given, decorations adorn homes, celebrations spring up everywhere for the celebration that remembers the visit of Magi to the baby Jesus. The birth of the Christ child is a splendid beginning, goes the thinking, but at Epiphany we begin to really see who this child is, we begin to really see the good news of God among us. So Epiphany is most worthy of celebration, but I don't know about you, but my "celebrator" is all out of fuel. I just dragged the boxes of ornaments back to the basement and I'm all set on cookies and confections for a good long while. So how about we simplify today? Have you ever seen one of those online quizzes, which Disney character are you? Or which Star Wars or Harry Potter character are you? Those are always fun, so how about if we celebrate Epiphany by asking which Epiphany character are you?

In the story of the magi visiting the Christ child, we can rule out at the outset that our place is that of Jesus. This is sometimes a dangerous interpretive move, as to read any sacred story from the gospels and say, "That is what Jesus did, therefore that is what I must do," can be problematic. To be sure, we are followers in the way of Christ, but we must be careful not to make ourselves one and the same with Christ. Our interpretive decision in this case though is easy. Jesus is completely passive. He is the adored one, but doesn't actually *do* anything in the Epiphany story. No that isn't our place.

Perhaps we do better to see ourselves as the Magi themselves. They are rugged travelers having come from somewhere in the East, we can't be sure exactly where. With all respect to the famous hymn, they weren't Kings, they were more likely sorcerers or diviners of some sort. Astrologers would be a good guess given their penchant for watching the skies and following stars. At any rate, they have been given the ability to recognize the birth of a King so notable that they come from afar to pay homage to this new ruler. Again tradition tells us there were three and almost certainly this could not have been what Matthew intended. Just because there were three gifts does not mean there were only three "wise men", indeed a journey of such distance as they were said to have travelled would have required an entire convoy of travelers. We do better to imagine a caravan of so called "wise men", perhaps even with their families and certainly with their animals of burden, and of course treasure chests full of gifts.

Wouldn't we like to fit in as those who gather in community to bear up the weight of our collective riches and bear them at great effort to God? We may well do that, but that isn't really Matthew's focal point here I think. In a story that situates Jesus's birth firmly within the context of the broader story of Jewish history, these men are gentiles and they come from an unmentionable part of the world and have nothing to do with the son of the great King David. No the point Matthew has begun to make and will do so more explicitly later is that this new King will graft the nobodies into this story so that they have as much to do with it as the

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

somebodies. To gather as mainline, American Christians in a warm building or through our electronic devices and read ourselves as the outsiders might be as problematic as reading ourselves as Jesus.

Maybe we should read ourselves in a cautionary place in the story. Perhaps when we're not at our best we inadvertently or otherwise assume the role of Herod. He was a master in getting his way. Physical history in Palestine remembers him well and fondly. He was known for his tremendous building projects throughout the land which were, history tells us, each crafty ways of appeasing different constituencies – a massive expansion of the temple to yhwh in Jerusalem and major tributes to Roman deities in other cities. You see, Herod's place as Roman appointed governor was always tenuous and so he governed out of fear. When appeasement didn't work, he was no stranger to violence for the sake of holding on to power. We learn a bit later in the gospel, in fact, that his sending the magi to report back on the whereabouts of this newborn King is actually a part of a half-baked murderous plan.

We are reminded again this week with the passing of the first anniversary of the US capitol riots that we humans are want at times to hold on to power by any means necessary – even violence. But lest we miss the plank in our own eye, let us remember that state for which the capitol stands, that *we the people*, also ensure our security and wealth through violent means. Yes, there is something of valuable caution for us in the person of Herod, but I don't know on this day of celebration if I'm quite ready to say that we hold precisely that place in the story.

The Chief priests and the scribes offer a final place for us to stand within the story. This is their first appearance in Matthew. Later in the narrative Matthew will pit them against Jesus as protectors of tradition merely for the sake of tradition. Here in this encounter that role is fulfilled only passively. They, as the principle religious leaders and scholars of the Jewish people, are called on for information. Threatened, Herod would call on the scribes and priests to inquire about some specifics of the expected coming of the Messiah, so he could crush this problematic rumor in its infancy. It is interesting though, the scribes and priests were the ones whose lives were oriented around the hope of God coming into the world, but they were not the ones preparing to go and see. The keepers of the tradition, were steeped so deeply in their tradition that they could not recognize its fulfillment in the world even when some astrologers from the East could!

Oh how tragic it would be if this were our place in the story. If we gathered in our place of worship retelling the story over and over, going back and forth about what it all means. Oh don't get me wrong. To gather and go over and over the story is a very good thing unless the very good thing we're hoping for is already taking place out there and we're missing it because we're too busy getting ready for it in here. That would be a tragedy. We can't let that become our place in the story.

No, we serve ourselves and God best not to take this role or that of Herod. We might like to think of ourselves as the magi, but we don't seem to fit Matthew's intent for their place in the story. And of course, the role of Messiah is one best left to the living God, we'll not assume that role. And so it is that we have exhausted the characters in the story and not found a single place we'd like to claim as our own. Oh surely we must have overlooked something. We've made a glaring omission somewhere, I know it, these things always tend to hide in plain sight, but what could it be?

Plain sight! That's it. The most visible element of the entire story, bright and shining there in the night sky. "Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright." There is one place in this story we may occupy well by God's grace – a herald that the waiting is over and God has come among us. "Westward leading, still proceeding, Guid[ing] to thy perfect light." Yes, the guide to the magi, the shining emblem that hope is alive. Could we, oh could we take this place in the story? In this modern reliving of the Jesus story could we, just a single congregation in a troubled city, be the guiding light which announces to the world that God has come among us. Could we by adorning ourselves not with fear as Herod or senseless tradition as the scribes, but with hope enough to fill the night sky, become a beacon for weary seekers? If those who've been told they have to be a certain thing, or act a certain way, or possess certain qualities in order to be known to this little child, in order to offer their gifts were to look up, could we be there to guide them home?

Even this place in the story will be difficult to fulfill, but is there a better place for us to occupy than to be they whose light illumines the way for those who wish to know, Christ has come?
Amen.