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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

“The Wise Men”

Last week I stopped into Target and immediately knew there was something different about the store. As I took a closer look I realized what was different: it was quiet! The crowds of people that filled the place in December were gone, and the clerks seemed less frazzled. Christmas is over, I thought.

But not here. Not in the church. Despite the fact that the merchants are already hawking Valentine’s goods, here in the church it’s still the Christmas season, the 12th day to be precise. And tomorrow is officially Epiphany.

Epiphany is not much of a celebration for us in the US Protestant church. But for others, it is a huge celebration. In some Central and South American countries, Epiphany-not Christmas-is the day to open presents. And Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Epiphany in grand style, much like we do Christmas.

Epiphany, you may know, is the day we celebrate the Magi finally arriving at Bethlehem.

We all know the story of the wise men coming to bring their gifts to the baby Jesus. We’ve heard it a thousand times and seen it come to life in Christmas pageants. But our pageants and carols have messed up the story, truth be told. It’s hard to separate Matthew’s Wise Men from Luke’s shepherds, but it’s important that we do so we understand the story fully. So exit the shepherds and enter the magi, exit the stable and enter the palace; exit poverty and enter wealth, exit angels and enter dreams. This is the Jesus of Matthew. And the world into which he was born is extremely important.

The Magi come to Jerusalem to visit the new king. We don’t know, really, how many there were. Hymns and traditions and pageants state that there were 3, but we only think that because they brought three gifts. And Matthew doesn’t state their names, either. Only later did we assign them names: Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar. Who should not be confused with Caspar the Friendly Ghost, even though the Book of Acts refers to them as magicians who dabble in the occult.

The Magi most closely resemble modern day astrologers. The Greek word Matthew uses really has nothing to do with Kings. The magi were probably members of the priestly class from Persia or Babylon, experts in astrology or interpreting dreams. And, truth be told, they’re pagans. Gentiles. Which sets up conflict number 1 for Jesus and the authorities and point number 1 for Matthew, which is that Jesus is a gift for everyone, including the Gentiles.

They arrive at King Herod's place and ask Herod where the King of the Jews is. Now, at this point in the story the reader can only assume that the magi are not very street smart or just don't care what Herod thinks, because it's not very good manners to arrive at the king's palace asking where his replacement is. Secondly, they've landed in Jerusalem, which is 9 miles away from Bethlehem, the place where they want to be. So Herod, greatly disturbed at the thought that there's a new king on the horizon, sends them down the road to Bethlehem, right after he inquires of his own leaders what this newborn king business is all about.

The magi, we have heard by now, also arrive about 2 years late. And the gifts they bring, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, are lovely but not very practical. I mean, what are Joseph and Mary supposed to do with those gifts? But they are gifts suited for a king.

So here they are these wise men. Here at the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew are three Gentiles kneeling at the manger. Some may say that's incidental, or accidental, but I don't think so. I think Matthew is trying to tell us something, something very important. I believe Matthew, who is known for being the most "Jewish" of the Gospels, wants the reader to know that Christ came for the Gentiles, too.

And so there is a word here at the beginning of the New Testament about the inclusivity and universality of Christianity. The earliest Christians were Jewish and happy to remain a kind of subset of Judaism. But Gentiles kept hearing and responding to the message. One of the early Church's first real struggle was to break out of and away from the restrictions of race, nationality, and ethnicity and to become a gospel, a faith for all people.

One of the current struggles for the contemporary church has to do with a variation of that old issue. Should we concentrate more on defining who is in and who is out, or should we not be learning to live with lowered boundaries and open "borders"?

Matthew, who most scholars agree is the "most Jewish" of all the gospels, concludes that the latter will suffice just fine, thank you. At the beginning of the Gospel come the Magi, who came to worship the king of all nations and peoples, and at the end of the gospel that same "king", now all grown up, tells the disciples to go out, and make disciples of all nations. The stories serve as nice bookends to the gospel, I think, reminding us that no fences make good fences.

But plenty of people do want to build fences, just like they did back in Matthew's day. You see, this story isn't really a story about 3 kings, but a story about 2 kings: the corrupt, violent, earthly King Herod, and the loving, justice seeking, peace maker Jesus. The Magi give us just a glimpse of what is to come, and Herod's slaughter of the innocent male babies is only a foreshadow of the violent death Jesus will eventually face. Throughout Jesus' life, these two kingdoms will collide, time and again, and at times it will appear that Herod's kingdom is winning the battle.

But don't be discouraged just yet, because the Magi went home by a different road. Granted, it wasn't the most direct route, or the easiest or most comfortable. But many things worth working for are not. For us, who have also traveled to Bethlehem, the road is difficult, but things are different now that we've been to Bethlehem. I know it might not seem that way when we look at the headlines, but things are different.

Because we are different.

We have been to the manger. We have seen the light. We know that Joy, Hope, Peace, and Love have been born. We have seen the face of God. We have witnessed to the impossible notion that God has come among us, that Emmanuel is God with us.

And because of that, we can go out into the world, telling people about this Light that shines for everyone, not only the worthy, that shines for the sinner and the sinless, the righteous and the not-so-righteous, that shines for the humble and the proud, the Jew and the Gentile, that shines for you and for me.

And because of that the world will be different, because we are now different.

We have seen the child, and nothing beyond Bethlehem will ever be the same.

Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Amen.

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, commentary for Epiphany Sunday

www.workingpreacher.org

John Buchanan, "Home By A Different Road"