

No More Outsiders

Today is Epiphany which is a Christian feast day that dates back all the way to 200 AD where we celebrate the coming of the magi, commonly called wise men, to bring gifts to Jesus. The word epiphany is defined as a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. 2) an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure 3) a revealing scene or moment. In other words, an epiphany reveals something very important about the very essence of something. The Bible itself doesn't use the word epiphany; rather, the early church decided that the story we read in Matthew 2 was an epiphany. In other words, the early church felt that there was something profoundly revealing about the nature of who Jesus is that we discover in the story where the magi come to visit Jesus.

Matthew is the most Jewish of all the gospels. Throughout the gospel, Matthew wants to portray Jesus as the new Moses, the new and improved version. It is Matthew's gospel, where Jesus says I've not come to abolish the Old Testament law, but to fulfill it. Throughout the gospel of Matthew, the writer over and over again quotes the Old Testament to try to show how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. In Matthew 2, the selected reading for the Day of Epiphany, in only 23 verses, Matthew cites 4 Old Testament passages and claims that Jesus fulfills them. And that is why it is so surprising that in the gospel of Matthew, it is the Magi, foreigners, Gentiles, people who practice a different religion that are the first ones to come and visit Jesus. That would be more expected in say the gospel of Luke, but it's in Matthew and only in Matthew – Luke, the gospel that overall is the most friendly to the Gentiles doesn't even tell this story – but only Matthew, the most Jewish of all the gospels, that the first visitors to Jesus are not Jews, but Gentiles. It is completely unexpected and, to Matthew's original audience, would have been completely shocking.

For many of us, this story is so familiar with children's Christmas pageants and manger scenes, that I think it's easy to lose sight of just how shocking this is...and how offensive it would have been to many. Matthew is not some outsider gadfly trying to annoy the faithful people of the synagogue. He is deeply committed to the Jewish faith, an active part of the Jewish community and the synagogue. He goes to great pains to show how Jesus is Jewish to the core. Matthew is an insider and, yet, decides to begin his gospel by placing outsiders, Gentiles, as the first people to recognize Jesus for who he truly is.

And even more shocking is that the Magi are not only foreigners, but they are people of a different religion. They were astrologers; not followers of the Jewish God. And it was through their practice of their religion, through their study of the stars that led them in their search for Jesus. They followed the star not Scripture to bring Jesus gifts. But notice what doesn't happen in the story. They don't convert. They don't decide to swear off astrology for Judaism. They don't move to Israel so they can follow Jesus. They honor Jesus but then they go home, presumably to continue practicing astrology. And these are the people that Matthew tells us were the first ones to recognize Jesus for who he truly is.

Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus came for everybody and it's so important that it is Matthew who is delivering that message. He's the ultimate insider saying that in Jesus, there are no more outsiders. The Christ child came for all, Jew and Gentile, members of the synagogue and followers of another religion. This would be the equivalent of a modern day pastor telling the story that it's actual a devout Hindu or a devout Muslim who can better recognize Jesus.

It's a strange thing that something that should be such unequivocal good news – that Jesus brings hope and life to all – can be so offensive, can be so terrifying. When Nina was three years old, she loved scary stories – she still does. But at that time, it was very common for her to ask for scary bedtime stories. Just about every night before bed, she'd say, "Daddy, I want a story with an alligator, a scary bee, a snake, and a scary clown." That was usually our pattern. She would think of whatever was on her mind and ask me or Mary Page to tell a scary story about those things. Well, when it was Christmas time, one night I told her the story of the baby Jesus and when I finished, she said, "Daddy tell me the story of the baby Jesus again. But this time tell me the story of the scary baby Jesus."

I laughed. I told my family and friends because I thought it was cute. And I emailed it to my favorite professor in seminary – Peter Storey – the Methodist bishop in South Africa who worked most closely with Desmond Tutu in opposing apartheid. He replied, "Tell Nina I frequently find Jesus scary – and Herod certainly did." While I laughed about Nina's desire for a scary baby Jesus story, she had it more accurate than I realized. The scripture tells us that when the magi came to Herod in search of the Messiah that he and all of Jerusalem was frightened. Herod was so afraid of Jesus and what Jesus represented that he was willing to slaughter babies.

And I think it's worth asking why? Why would a little baby be so scary to a powerful king. And I think it's precisely because of what this story says about that baby and the gospel he came to bring – namely, the gospel refuses to allow us to separate people into insiders and outsiders, saved and damned, good and bad. If we learn anything from the story of the Magi, it's that Jesus is for everybody and while we who worship him as God's son may see him as the founder of our religion, we don't get to exclusively claim him either. The Epiphany of our Gospel is that Jesus truly is God with us. God with ALL of us...that God's love, God's embrace is big enough for those like us and those who are different, those who are from where we're from and those from far off lands, those who believe what we believe and those who believe something completely different.

And while that should be unequivocally good news, it's not to those who like to use fear of the other to gain and hold on to power, prestige, and wealth. It's not good news to those who want to divide us into insiders and outsiders, into good and bad. In fact, this message that in Christ, there are no more outsiders is so threatening that the story of the magi doesn't end with the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It ends with Herod slaughtering babies and the holy family fleeing as refugees.

Friends, we live in an incredibly divisive time. We see this division taking place on university campuses throughout this city. We see it in town meetings and within congregations. Many people even experience it around the dinner table at Thanksgiving or Christmas. And I fear that 2024, with it being an election year, is going to feel even more divisive. And I think it's important to remember that division is not the same as disagreement. Disagreement is normal. I disagree with my wife sometimes but we are still a family. The brokers of Division, on the other hand, seek to take our disagreements and add a whole lot of fear to the mix to the point where we are told that we not only disagree but that we can't be in community with those with whom we disagree. The Herods of this world want us to fear those deemed as outsiders, those deemed as different. They want to make us demonize and denigrate them. This year especially, there will be billions of dollars spent trying to make us think the very worst things about other people, other people who are children of God, created in the Image of God.

As we go throughout this year, let's remember what Epiphany truly reveals to us. The story of Jesus' birth is one where the first people to see Jesus for who he truly is were dirty shepherds and foreign wise men. It continues with a tyrant trying to murder Jesus so he and his family must flee as refugees. This is the story that our faith hinges on. Whatever else Jesus became, his life began as a refugee. Maybe that's why throughout his life he consistently preached that in God's kingdom the last would be first, the oppressed would be set free, and the poor would find good news.

Like the magi, may we too have eyes to see Jesus for who he is, for who he truly is. May we see him every time we look into the precious eyes of our children and friends and family. But may we also see him every time we hear someone complaining about this group or that group they want us to fear. May we see him and grieve every time we hear of someone suffering whether they look like us, talk like us, vote like us, or act like us. May we see him in each other. May we see him in all people.

No matter what this year may bring, may we remember the lesson of the wise men – in Christ, there are no outsiders. This is the Epiphany of the Son of God.