

Epiphany Day 2019 Sermon

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'*"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Today, January 6, is the Feast of the Epiphany. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, Epiphany is one of the **Great** Feasts of the liturgical year, being third in importance only behind Easter and Pentecost.¹ For Christians in the West, however, the meaning of this Feast Day can seem somewhat fuzzy. Look up the word "epiphany" in Webster's dictionary, and you find *several* definitions. In our daily English language, we most often hear the word "epiphany" used to mean "an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure."² To say, "I just had an epiphany!" means that I had a sudden realization or revelation that I hadn't been aware or conscious of before.

The way the *Church* uses the word "Epiphany," however, is in the sense of "an appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being."² Throughout the Season of Epiphany, we read Gospel stories of various revelations or manifestations of Jesus' divine nature. On Epiphany Day, we read of the revelation of Jesus' birth to the Magi, often called "the Wise Men" or "the 3 Kings." The Sunday *after* Epiphany, we always read about Jesus' baptism, and the voice from heaven revealing, "This is my son, the beloved." In the Season of

Epiphany, we read of various miracles of Jesus. And the season always ends with the story of Jesus' Transfiguration – read on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday.

Now, according to the rules of our Episcopal Church calendar, we are not allowed to transfer the observance of Epiphany to a Sunday;³ so we *only* hear the story of the Wise Men read on Sunday if January 6 falls on a Sunday, as it does this year. The story is only found in the Gospel of Matthew, where it is recorded, as we just heard, that wise men from the East come to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” The *local* king of the Jews, the ruthless and paranoid Herod the Great, hears this, and he is frightened. Right at the *beginning* of his Gospel, Matthew sets forth a theme that will be repeated throughout his Gospel – the theme of the clash of two kingdoms: the earthly kingdom ruled by earthly rulers, often power-hungry and unscrupulous (like Herod); and the kingdom of heaven which Jesus reveals and manifests in his own life, teachings, and actions. It is ironic that 3 foreign Kings from the East come to worship Jesus, while Herod, king of Jesus' own Jewish people, tries to kill the infant Jesus by ordering the slaughter of all the children in and around Bethlehem who are two years old or under.⁴

Let's take advantage of this rare Sunday reading about the Magi to have a closer look at these Wise Men and the clash of kingdoms which starts at the beginning of Jesus' life.

We might begin by asking, “Who *were* these Wise Men from the East?” Professor Craig Satterlee writes:

“While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were kings..., a more precise description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science.

“So these Wise Ones from the East were scientists and practiced other religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ. More ironic, God used scientists who practiced other religions to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people [of Israel] in on the news that **their** Messiah had been born.

“God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people,” Dr. Satterlee continues. “God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God's own people through visitors from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God's reach, God's embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all

people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross.⁵ In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace."⁶ (unquote)

No one is beyond the embrace of God's kingdom, which, as we see with the Magi, includes foreigners and those who practice other religions.

My friends, you and I live in a time when nationalism is on the rise around the globe; when fear – even hatred – of those of *other* nationalities or languages or socio-economic class or religion or political party is increasing, and **rejection** of these “others” is increasingly seen as acceptable and justifiable. Rather than being brought closer together through the kingdom of God revealed in Jesus, who draws the whole world to himself, we, today, are often ruled by the values of the kingdom of this world, which drives people further apart. And tragically, some people even try to use **Christianity** – the religion of the followers of Jesus – to *justify* the rejection of others.

And so, there is no better time than now for us to look long and hard at the story of these Wise Men from the East.

They were likely from Persia, modern day Iran – foreigners who spoke a foreign tongue and practiced a foreign religion. They did not come to Judea because they had read Old Testament prophecies; they came because they had read the night sky. And that sky had told them that there would be a baby born in the far-off land of Judah who would be king of the Jews, a baby whom they went to worship and offer gifts, even though they were not of the Jewish religion.

The Magi come to some kind of faith in the God-made-flesh in this infant Jesus; but they are not converted to Judaism or Christianity. They haven't read the Jewish scriptures, nor have they listened to sermons in the synagogue – the normal path that Jews took to come to faith. They do not have Jewish blood; they have not been circumcised. And yet it is these foreigners who practiced a foreign religion, and *not* the **Jewish** king or Jewish priests, who recognize the presence of God in the infant Jesus. If we take the story of the Magi seriously, it shows us that no one is beyond the embrace and call of God.

Of course, we *could* ignore this story and join Herod in **not** seeing God's ever-expanding embrace, being fearful of “the other,” even using violence to protect our privileged status, as Herod did. From the point of view of the kingdom of this world, rejection of “the other” is easily justified. We can draw a line separating us from others by almost any criteria we choose: political party, nationality, language, skin color, sexual orientation, religion, and on and on. Those on *our* side of the line are always “in,” and those on the *other* side are “out.” Yet, as Richard Rohr has repeatedly said, “Every time we draw a line between us and others, we find Jesus on the other side.”

Professor Satterlee, whom I quoted earlier, points out that when we are under the sway of the kingdom of this world, we can easily identify with King Herod. Dr. Satterlee writes: “We too can feel jealous when visitors show up seeking Christ due to experiences outside of our purview and control. We have our **own** ways of reaching out, just far enough to slaughter someone [else]’s experiences of God’s grace for the sake of **our** patterns, practices, and perspectives.” I think he’s right; at least, **I** can identify that tendency in myself. Muslims? Hindus? Those practicing other religions? What do they know of the true God? Foreigners from the Middle East – from Iran – they’re all dangerous; let’s keep them out of our country! But the Magi come from what is modern day Iran; and they practice the Middle-Eastern religion Zoroastrianism. And it is **they** who, sensing something cosmically powerful happening in God’s creation, are open to that epiphany of God-made-flesh in the form of an infant in a far-away land born into a religion strange to them. And it is those foreign priests of a foreign religion who are enshrined in our Christian Scriptures, they whose long and arduous journey to the Christ-Child we remember today.

AMEN

- 1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))
- 2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany>
- 3 *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 15-16
- 4 Matthew 2:16
- 5 John 12:32
- 6 http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1525