

January 8, 2023

Epiphany-Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Kelley Becker

Scripture

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon

“Wise men still seek him.” This little phrase has been around for decades. I’ve noticed Christians drag it out around Christmas to make a point, though I’m not sure what the point is. Like most catchy Christian billboard material, I think there is a lot to dislike about this phrase. For one thing, it is church speak. Church speak, for you who haven’t heard me talk about it, is language Christians use that instantly excludes people because its meaning is unclear, either because the language is not common anywhere but churches or because it is just plain vague. It makes people who haven’t spent much time around churches feel like

outsiders, which I would think would not be the goal. You've probably seen church speak on some church signs.

Here are a few examples I found:

"Jesus does not save halfway."

"The best vitamin for a believer is B1."

"Looking for the perfect gift? Find him here."

Having worked in churches for a long time, I know church leadership spends many hours and many dollars trying to figure out how to attract people who are spiritual seekers to their church. I'm guessing using cute little phrases that confound potential visitors is probably not the way to do that. In fact, the opposite is more likely the way at it: talking about life and the Holy in ways that people can relate to.

The magi in today's story were seekers. I don't know that they would have called themselves *spiritual* seekers, but they were curious, and they were seeking answers. Today we are offered an opportunity to extract the magi from their fixed places in Christmas pageants and nativity scenes and restore them to their biblical roles as key witnesses to both the threat and the promise of the kingdom of God breaking into a world that expected something or someone very different.

Another word for magi is astrologers. Most scholars think these strangers from afar were Zoroastrian priests. Part of their culture included following the patterns of stars. They believed significant events were heralded by parallel events in the sky. One example of that is the common belief that important births were announced with a new star in the sky. So naturally, when they saw a star rising, they wanted to see what was up.

We haven't always referred to the magi in this story as magi. Traditional Christianity has called them "three kings," though there is no evidence there were three of them and no basis for the assumption they were kings. But it's a great song. And we've heard them called "wise men," though the ancient Jewish folks the author of Matthew was writing for would not have thought those stargazing strangers were wise. They would have thought they were foolish. They would have thought they were heretics, certainly not wise. They would have said things in casual conversation like, "Those fellas are really 'out there.'"

The magi saw the world differently and didn't believe the "right" things. That way of thinking isn't too hard for us to imagine, is it? Christians and the Church have often condemned or ridiculed and do often condemn and ridicule alternative spiritual practices, different ways in which other people have connected with the Holy. Rather than being curious about what other people believe, sometimes the go-to is "You're doing it wrong." Sometimes suspicion has led to fear and that hasn't worked out so well for the ones who have been designated different or other. Think Salem Witch Trials and Anne Frank.

Yet in this story of the magi's trek to Bethlehem, the author of Matthew presents these strangers who think, act, and believe differently in a positive light. He even brings in the chief priest and scribes to lend credence to these seekers' quest. Matthew makes a helpful example of them, portraying them as more open to the possibility of a Messiah than some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, which was the seat of Jewish power. At the end of their journey, the story tells us their hearts were filled with joy. They knew they were bearing witness to the beginning of something very important and very special. In this gospel's narrative, it was significant that the magi, who were not Jewish, who were in all ways outsiders, recognized Jesus as some kind of king, even though the star did not lead them to a palace like they may have expected. It led them to an ordinary baby.

Later in the Gospel of Matthew, the author tells the story of the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus addresses a large crowd, presumably a mixture of all kinds of people, who believed all kinds of things, and he said, "Ask, and it will be given you, search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you" (Matthew 7:7). There was no qualifier; he did not say, "If you are Jewish, ask and it will be given you, search and you find..." Or, "If you are a man..." Or, "If you are smart or able-bodied or white or love the right people..." His point was, if you seek a connection with the sacred, you will find connection. And I would go a step further and say that sometimes, even if we aren't seeking, or we don't realize we are seeking, we will find connection anyway.

The nativity behind me is kind of a visual representation of that. It doesn't include the magi because, from a story and plot perspective, their visit would have been much later than this scene represents, but it does include all sorts of characters and it reminds us that we can all find our way to the manger; a place

where everyone is welcome to be, just as they are. The manger, in this story, is a place where we see what God is like.

And to get there, like the magi, we all follow a star or stars, even if only metaphorically. I wonder, what star are you following? What is guiding your journey toward love and toward you living into an authentically “you” life? The Holy speaks to each of us differently. Your way of seeking, your way of connecting with love are not the same as anyone else’s. And reflecting on that, it seems pretty mysterious and (dare I say) miraculous that each one of us, perfectly unique, have our own perfectly unique way of seeking and finding the Love that, I believe, is God. But even if you don’t believe that human beings are ultimately seeking God, we are all seeking something....belonging, love, wisdom, wholeness, whatever we seek, we seek it in our own way. There is something beautiful about that, don’t you think?

In addition, there is something beautiful that happens in our lives when we find what we are seeking. I think that’s one of the gifts of community. There is the chance that we get to bear witness to people we love and care about finding what they long for. And sometimes they find it in surprising ways. That moment is the moment we “witness” in the story of the magi. It is the moment they find what they had been seeking. The author asks us to imagine their surprise when, upon seeing Jesus, they could do nothing other than kneel and honor him. The word is not worship, it is honor or pay great respect to. This baby was going to do great things, even if they didn’t quite understand what those things were.

We know that some of those things are the same kind of things that we are still being called to today. Welcoming the ones who have been excluded. Standing on the side of the ones who are vulnerable and oppressed. Meeting the needs of our neighbors who lack shelter, food, medicine, and utilities. And reflecting the unique images of God we all are into the world. And the world needs that. The world needs the light that radiates from each of us as we go about seeking and finding what we long for.

This spiritual longing is front and center in the magi’s story. Like other stories in the gospel tradition, this one challenges the assumptions of the ones who are usually first and satisfies the thirst of the ones who are usually last. Communities that exhibit that kind of hospitality are revealing what the kin-dom of God. They

serve as a beacon for all who are restless for their true home. In this way, when churches are at their best, the star of Bethlehem is replicated because our words and our actions help people find what they long for in community and in service to the world. Our separate journeys intersect as we each find what we have been seeking.

To help us on our journey each year, just as the magi gave gifts to Jesus, we are each given a gift on this day, a star word. Star words aren't just a random fun thing for us to do as we celebrate Epiphany. There is theological significance in this tradition:

First, the magi followed a star which ultimately led them to Jesus. Likewise, we use star words to guide us through this new year, hopefully illuminating our path and helping us find what we are seeking.

Second, we acknowledge that God is still speaking into the world today and star words are opportunities for us to listen from a different perspective or lens.

And last, by receiving a star chosen randomly, we practice the spiritual task of receiving. If only for a moment, we are not in control. Star words help us let go of what has always been and open ourselves up to something new. God is always doing something new.

My prayer for you is that your star word will help you seek and find what you are longing for in this season of life. Amen.