

New Light

Matthew 2:1-12

This sermon was preached by Pastor Heather Wigdahl on January 3, 2010 at Trinity Lutheran Church.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The gospel of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Grace and peace to you in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. Well, it is a wonderful celebration we gather for today—for it is Epiphany time, the celebration of the coming of LIGHT among us—the light of God especially at it comes to us in the person of Jesus. Our season of Epiphany in the church year spans from now until Lent, is a whole season full of LIGHT.

“Epiphany” (ἐπιφάνεια) literally means “appearance” or “coming into light.” The Greeks used it to describe the dawning of a new day, and *especially* to refer to a new manifestation of God in the world.

Our strange and wonderful visitors from the east become the first to teach us about this “coming of light” that will be Christ among us. Matthew is the only gospel writer to include these eastern visitors in his narrative. And they serve a very important role—to illuminate us about who God is (and who God is not) as well as who we are, too.

But first, to dispel a few assumptions we make about these mystical visitors. According to Matthew, they did follow a star or an astronomical sign of some sort, *BUT*, the *night* of Jesus’ *birth* did NOT dawn their arrival. An educated guess is that they traveled from Persia, or modern-day Iran, some 800 miles on camel or by foot—a very long journey. They likely arrived when Jesus was many months, maybe *years* old.

Another legend suggests that these visitors were actually foreign **KINGS**. But nothing in our scripture suggests this is the case.

Nor is there any mention that there are **THREE** of them...there may have been 5, 10, 30, the gospel doesn’t tell us. The number 3 comes, I suppose, from the gifts they brought—gold, frankincense and myrrh—but these were in a sense, a common currency, and likely *each* visitor carried a little of each to offer. Matthew calls these visitors **MAGI**, in the Greek (*that’s where we get the term MAGI*).

Often we translate this word as “wise men,” but this is a bit misleading to our contemporary ears. *Magi* would better be translated as dream-interpreters. In Jesus’ day, “magi” referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, star-gazers. In fact, our words “magic” and “magician” come from the word “magi”.

Magi would *not* have been viewed as respected “wise men” or “kings” to those hearing Matthew’s gospel for the first time; rather, they would have been seen as horoscope fanatics—a practice deeply condemned by Matthew’s very Jewish audience.

So what, DOES Matthew want us to know about these foreign visitors?

First, they are *outside* of the Jewish religion and culture. They are pagans, in every sense of the word. Matthew uses these outsiders to proclaim that God welcomes the gifts and energies of **all people**—a pretty radical message to Matthew’s first audience, and if we really apply this truth to our daily lives, it changes the way we view and interact with those different than us, too.

A **second point** Matthew illuminates with the magi is their act of faith in following a new star, a new “light”—believing it to be a sign that God was up to something new in the

world. Ancient peoples were not, of course, versed in astronomy as we know it—stars were not huge balls of gaseous fire millions of light years away—they were angels, heavenly beings in the night sky.

In Matthew's story, the magi follow this new light believing it would lead them to a new revelation of God. *But, they, themselves, are actually a new revelation, too.* They “reveal” that God is at work in the people and places we might not expect.

The Magi come from outside the Jewish community.

Outside the Jewish faith.

Outside of what is acceptable to Matthew's audience.

But they embody faith, different, but faith none the less.

And maybe they represent the world outside of *us, too*—that which is different—scary, unfamiliar—yet where God is still at work.

There is finally a **third point** I think Matthew wants to make with the Magi's visit. And it has to do with the journey itself. If you recall, they end up first, NOT in *Bethlehem*, where Jesus is born, but rather in the big city of *Jerusalem*. Jerusalem was a setting worthy of a new king—where they would have *expected* a king to be born—with splendor, where the temple stood, where King Herod resided. **Jerusalem was the center of government and power**—certainly the place where any king should be. Of course, Jesus was **born** NOT in a kingly setting at all, NOT in Jerusalem...

...but rather *a few miles south*, in the tiny peasant village of Bethlehem. **Our eastern travelers got off course, because of their expectations of who a king should be.** It's easy to do; we get off course too—sidetracked, by our ideas of who GOD *SHOULD* be...We look in the wrong places. We forget that God is always compassion and mercy, that God wears the clothes of humble servants, and hopeful visionaries. We forget that God often speaks through the still small voices of our souls, and through simple acts of love and grace.

We get off course, when we fool ourselves into equating blessing with success. Or really ever naming God's blessings as anything that's external or material. We get off course, led astray by our own ambitions, and egos, and personal pursuits.

But thankfully, God is still God, even when WE find ourselves lost. And *if* God is still God, then God will keep seeking us, and placing before us opportunities to be redirected.

The light of Christ shines on us and for us. It was true for the magi—even through the aid of one who wished Jesus harm, they were **redirected**. King Herod's FEAR, reminded

them that this NEW king must be different. The magi were *willing* to change course, to head south, and to allow God to show them this new king. **And after spending time with him, and his family, Matthew tells us that the magi “returned home by another road.”** In Greek, actually it says, they returned home **by another WAY** (ὁἄλιον) “hodos”. Suggesting, I think more than just a different route.

The magi, in Matthew’s telling, were changed by their encounter. Life would be different now for them. They went home by another way. *Early Christians actually called themselves “people of the way.”* NOT members of Trinity, or a particular denomination, they called themselves people of the way: *People who sought to follow the way of Jesus.* People willing—expecting—to be changed in their encounters of faith.

As this New Year greets us, Epiphany promises that new light will shine.

In the light of Christ, we will see honestly the mistakes we’ve made.

- But also that we don’t have to be perfect.

In the light of Christ, we will see the bitterness or anger that is destroying us.

- But also the grace of learning how to let it go.

In the light of Christ, we will see our clear call to work for justice—and to be passionate servants.

- But also in this light, we will better see the gifts God has already given us, the power we have to work for this good.

Martin Luther says that **every** day, in the waters of baptism, we are awakened to be a new person in Christ.

Every day, the light of Christ *shines* on us—showing us the love of God.

Every day, **light** comes to us: claiming us in forgiveness.

Every day, light beckons us: Calling us to walk with Christ—to walk in his light.

In this New Year, God will shine light on you—may you take it in fully, for all the life-changing, re-directing, living in the way glorious light that Christ will be for you, for us together.

Happy New Year, and new light. Amen.