

The Bethel Pulpit

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January 6, 2019 – Epiphany of our Lord



BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

I invite you to a word of prayer:

You, O God, are the Light of the World. You gave travelers of old the Light of your Star to guide them to the village of Bethlehem, where they recognized Jesus, the long-promised Messiah. We, too, need your Star to guide us, which forever will provide us with the light to find our Lord. Then, we humbly pray for the wisdom of discernment to recognize Jesus, our Savior, in our very midst, and to offer our prayer, praise and thanksgiving...we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

It's still Christmas! For anyone who is counting, we are on the TWELFTH DAY of CHRISTMAS!

Indeed, this day, Jan. 6: this 12th day of Christmas has an official title: the Feast of the Epiphany. The word Epiphany means the "showing"; in this case the showing of Jesus to the travelers from the East.

Matthew is the only Gospel that gives us the story that we refer to as the Epiphany. Every Gospel writer tells the story of Jesus in very distinct ways.

Mark says nothing at all about the birth of Jesus. The first mention of Jesus in Mark is at his baptism, when Jesus was about 30 years old. John gives us the beauty of poetry to describe how Jesus came among us: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

If we only had Mark and John, we would have no Sunday School pageants. Without Luke we would know nothing of the angel's appearance to Mary, of the shepherds or the singing of the angels. Only Matthew tells us of the travelers who saw, then followed this amazing star, first to Jerusalem where they asked the question: Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? And then, ultimately to Bethlehem, where the star stopped, bringing these travelers to their knees in wonder and worship.

Who were these 'travelers'? I am referring to them as travelers because the text does not tell us very much about them. Our English translation calls them "wise men". But the Greek word is 'magi', which is the word, in that day, used for astrologers and astronomers...people who studied the heavens and watched the movement of

the sun and moon and stars. Lots of uncertainty exists about their identity: possibly pagan, though religious Zoroastrian priests who were looking specifically for the birth of a long-promised person of divinity? The Bible only mentions the number 3 in relation to the gifts they brought, so we have made the assumption that there were three travelers. Kings? Probably not.

What about the star that these travelers followed? Maybe a comet, similar to Hailey's Comet, last seen in 1986, which appears every 75 years? Maybe a 'super-nova': an instantaneous explosion of stars?

All of our wondering about the specifics of identity, motives for their search or even about the scientific facts describing what constituted this particular star are fun...even interesting...but we will be careful not to spend too much time on our 'wonderings', but rather ask why it is that this story is important enough to be told. What does God want us to know about who and where God is, through the telling of this narrative?

Matthew is a crazy kind of Gospel. Matthew talks about stars and dreams and unusual kinds of gifts. We trust that Matthew is needing us to pay attention to these very out-of-the-ordinary realities. When have I ever paid attention to the stars, other than to marvel at the mystery and beauty of their God-created light? Would I ever ponder the possibility that a star might be actively 'leading' me to a place where God intends me to go?

At the very least, this story tells us that God uses very simple elements of creation to reveal life-changing events: so a simple moving star reveals the location of Jesus. Similar, is it not, to the common and simple elements of bread and wine that feed us with the love and forgiveness of Christ, even though we consume merely a tiny piece of bread and barely a sip of wine?

How about dreams? When was the last time, after you had a dream, that you called up your best friend, telling her or him that, because of the directions given in the dream, you would shape your activities of that day in accordance with those directions?

Yet, here in the first two chapters of Matthew, we read of 5 separate dreams: 4 of them to Joseph and one to the travelers, telling them the specifics of travel that God wanted them to follow, for the purpose of keeping that Baby Jesus safe. Take a few minutes and read those first two chapters of Matthew.

As we read the story of these travelers, it is fair to assume that Matthew wants us to know that God is a God of radical and extreme, even intentional inclusivity. Even without knowing the travelers' identity, we do know that these 'magi', though probably very religious, were not of the Jerusalem Jewish tradition, but rather came from a very distant land, far outside of the territory of Judah or Israel. God's choice to reveal the location of Jesus' birth to pagan outsiders, and then to have these outsiders lead others, not only to find Jesus, but also to lead them in adoration and praise of God's Son, born among humans, come to live among us.

How might such information about a God of inclusivity shape our own ways of ministry, even now in 2019? How might we seek out the wisdom of outsiders to our faith communities? How might we learn from them what THEY know about this God of all creation?

Can this story teach us to watch for the simple and common earthly elements to be part of God's ways of revealing important truths to us? God not only chose a common star, but even chose a lowly and common young woman and her betrothed to parent Jesus, all those early years of his life.

One more consideration from this story: what is the significance of the three gifts? When was the last time you went to the store to purchase a few ounces of gold or frankincense or myrrh to take as a gift to a new-baby-shower?

I think that God wants to give us clear indication of who Jesus was, simply by naming the gifts brought by these travelers: Gold: the gift that was always considered the most proper gift for kings; Frankincense: the gift that reminds us that incense is often used in worship, as we speak our prayers of praise and petition to the God of all creation; Myrrh: one of the spices that was commonly used to anoint bodies of those who had died, telling us that the crucifixion lay on the not-so-far-off horizon from the birth of this divine baby.

God uses common and lowly things...common and lowly people...to spread God's truth and love throughout the world. God always has and God always will. Common

and lowly people, like you and me, giving us all that we need to be a force for God's good in the very world we live in, to reveal the 'God in whom we live and move and have our being' to people we meet: in our families, in our neighborhoods and communities, in our work places, wherever our journey of life and faith take us.

This story of these eastern travelers teaches us that even something as simple as a star in the sky MIGHT lead us into places of risk...might call for spaces within us of courage...might give directions that demand trusting hearts...Let's watch for God's signs...for stars...for dreams...for outsiders who teach us new insights...

We close with a word of prayer:

God of all: you choose the outsider: the magi, who followed your Star, you choose the common and lowly: a peasant woman and her betrothed, to be the loving parents to your son...the lowly hamlet of Bethlehem, rather than a palace as the place where you would come to live with us.

You are a God of surprising choices...even now, as you choose each of us, to carry your Word of love and hope and forgiveness to our weary world. Bless us with your strength, your courage and your constancy.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.