

When I was first asked to speak on Epiphany Sunday, I have to admit that I did wonder, isn't that the Sunday when the wise men show up? While I rarely take notice of Epiphany's place within the church calendar, despite the fact that it is actually longer than advent, its theme of announcing the Kingdom of God on Earth is central to my understanding of the Gospels. Now, having had the opportunity to learn more about the visit of the magi, I am struck by the significance Epiphany can have for us.

Epiphany literally means to make manifest. In this context it refers to God made manifest on earth. God made apparent: obvious. And yet Epiphany is often made light of, with the magi's role in church plays and movies frequently being reduced to comedic relief. While their presence at the manger scene might be a bit silly, or at least a little strange, the magi help usher in God's new reality for the world: Jesus. Some church traditions represent Epiphany with the color green. This color is also used to symbolize discipleship and new life. This seems like an excellent place to start our re-consideration of epiphany, given our recent celebration of a new year.

The journalist Neil Gaiman has written new years wishes for his readers for the past 15 years . This year he wished this:

Be kind to yourself in the year ahead.

Remember to forgive yourself, and to forgive others.

Try to make your time matter: minutes and hours and days and weeks can blow away like dead leaves, with nothing to show but time you spent not quite ever doing things, or time you spent waiting to begin.

Meet new people and talk to them. Make new things and show them to people who might enjoy them.

Hug too much. Smile too much. And, when you can, love.

I feel like I could get behind these wishes. I mean they sound an awful lot like things Jesus, whom Matthew introduces in today's scripture, might have wished us at the beginning of a New Year. What might it be like if we used the coming of epiphany to guide our wishes and resolutions for the next year? What is in store for us with the coming of Jesus and what surprising things might God have in store for us this year that are revealed in this text?

Matthew begins writing his gospel focused on Jesus' messianic identity. Matthew essentially uses the same material for his writing as Mark does but he crafts his narrative to emphasise what the Kingdom of God looks like. Instead of telling us the sweet story of Jesus in the manger, a couple with no where to go, or singing angel choirs, Matthew gets right to the details and starts with Jesus' genealogy, (not exactly the thing to capture the reader's imagination), briefly mentions the virgin birth and then gets into the drama around Jesus' birth and Herod. This story of Epiphany is double the length of the birth of Jesus. Matthew also takes care to quote more of the Old Testament in order to prove to the listeners that Jesus really is the

completion of Israel's history. For those of us who don't have the OT memorized and might miss some of these quotes, I'll point out one for you. Herod is confused about who the wise men are searching for and asks his advisors for help. His advisors quote Micah 5:2 "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." Matthew highlights that Jesus is a fulfillment of what the prophets were anticipating but also that Jesus brings a new era of leadership for the Jewish people.

Once the magi meet Jesus they open their treasure chests and reveal their gifts. This, again, confirms that Jesus really is who was predicted in Isaiah 60. Verse 6 reads: "A multitude of Camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

Isaiah was written as an encouragement to the Jews upon their arrival back into Jerusalem. Isaiah assures believers that a foreign king is on his way and will be honored with gifts. Our Matthew text parallels nicely with this and reinforces that Jesus' birth was indeed the beginning of a new Kingdom.

While Jesus' arrival on earth is undeniably about the salvation of creation, I can't help but see the Magi's role, and the beginning of Epiphany, as being focused on the Kingdom of God and how we are to respond to God's incarnate nature on earth. God continues to work in us today just as God chose to work through a baby, a virgin teenager and a nervous carpenter.

I. Duality of Responses

God made flesh in Jesus is something familiar for us. We saw the kids act it out during our Christmas play. We sing “Joy to the World, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King!” But these are powerful words and elicited very strong responses from those that heard it first.

This passage in Matthew begins by reminding us that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod. William Willimon describes Herod as one of history’s great villains. He not only murdered most of his good friends, but even his beloved wife, and three of his own sons. He was threatened by everybody.” This is definitely not someone who sounds ok with the birth of a new leader of God. Herod catches word that the wise men have arrived in Jerusalem and are asking where they can worship the King of the Jews and his immediate reaction is fear. The Wise men’s inquiry is a threat to the very kingdom that was currently reigning. To pay homage, or worship as some translations say, was to prostrate oneself towards Jesus. They wanted to pledge their allegiance to political powers and emperors. This is not like singing or praising like we imagine “worship” on a Sunday morning. This was a direct threat that caused fear and rightly so.

In response Herod brings his allies, essentially the elite experts of law, together to gain information about where this child is. The answer they come up with is Bethlehem, again from the Micah 5:2 which was written as a desire for a new imperial ruler. This might be considered a bit of a fail on the part of the advisors. Instead of assuring Herod that he is king and has nothing to worry about, they quote

an ancient text calling for a new ruler. This added insult to the fire and Herod needed to do something. I find this whole scenario fascinating. It sounds like something that you could make into a movie. Classic villain hears about a threat to his kingdom. He inquires more and hears worse news, then decides that he should trick the wise men into telling him more information by pretending to want to worship Jesus and the wise men buy it. However, unlike a Hollywood blockbuster, God thwarts the evil villain with a dream and the wise men never come back to report Jesus' whereabouts to Herod.

The wise men respond to the news about the new king of Jews in almost the complete opposite way that Herod does. These two characters are classic good guy, bad guy. The magi hear of some distant star which indicates a king has been born and they react in joy and excitement, pack up their things and set out on a long journey. The Magi were eastern astrologers perhaps from Parthia, or modern day Iran. They were not kings but they did have access to centers of power. But perhaps the most startling thing about the magi is that they are gentiles. They did not already believe in Yahweh though they were probably privy to what the scriptures wrote about God. To me this seems to be a pretty big issue. Why in the world would they want to just leave their luxurious lives to seek out a king they didn't see as their ruler? And what did the others around them think? Were they held in honor for their pursuit of knowledge or looked upon as crack jobs and a little confused? WE don't know how many magi left on the trip or how many stayed at home but I'm guessing those who left weren't in the majority. Willimon writes that the Magi were

really just thrill seekers, wanting an adventure. “Presumably most of their fellow magi stayed home, took no journeys toward the east, refused to go off on some wild camel ride to see a baby on the basis of nothing more than a star.” But yet Matthew chooses these unlikely messengers. Matthew chooses those outside of the Kingdom of God, the others and fish out of water, to announce the manifestation of God. Surely this must tell us that the Kingdom of God is open to more than those born as Jews and that Christianity, as modeled by Christ, is open to the far-flung and the unlikely. This baby is God’s gift for the whole world.

Which character are you in this story?

Herod responds with fear and anxiety to the unknown. Do you hold on to some fear of trusting something unknown like the Kingdom of God? Do you hold onto certainty and what you know?

The magi were full of wild exuberance. Do you feel Wide spread joy ready to share with others? Are we willing to go on a journey full of uncertainty?

While both of these scenarios are extreme there is a glimmer of truth in them. God’s Kingdom evokes responses in us that we must take seriously. Committing to follow Jesus’ rule in the world requires us to grapple with fear, uncertainty, and joy. One thing we know for sure in this is that the baby is for all of us, wherever we are on this journey.

II.

While we learn and change in our approach to faith, we constantly need to reevaluate what society is telling us and how this relates to the church. The magi’s

visit to Jesus was a counter cultural act and doesn't follow the path we would assume.

The magi were the highest, most wise people in the east and were humbled at the foot of the manger. This in itself is a counter to our culture. We don't expect the world's top financial advisors or business executives to drop everything they are doing, travel to a truck stop, kneel in the puddles of mud, and worship a lowly baby. But yet the wise men do this. It is a total shift in who is on the top and hints at what Jesus' message is all about in terms of God's upside down Kingdom.

I have a really hard time imagining that the magi really did leave due to seeing a star and that the magi were converted to Judaism. In the same way I find it hard to believe that people go through sudden and radical conversions, though the stories are wide spread.

Thinking about the magi made me reflect on how God chooses to work in our lives. God has always been a personal God and it is assured that God does desire to be a part of our lives. But I wonder how we go about noticing God's presence with us? What things guide us and are the radical stars that we follow in the sky? Perhaps wisdom in community guides us, or an emphasis on scripture, or perhaps dreams. Throughout the Christmas story there are moments when people are attuned to God's voice and desires through angels (as is the case with Zechariah and Mary), dreams (with Joseph) and now Magi with the stars. These are very strong symbols that are hard to miss but I feel like the bright shining stars a bit too faint these days.

My dreams are a bit too muddled and confusing and I don't think I've ever heard the voice of an angel (sorry David). But I also think that my tendency has been to looking very hard for stars since if I look, and there is nothing revealed, then it feels as though God has let me down. It is easier not to search and wait to see signs. But if we search too hard, and expect God, then it becomes a test of God and can set us up to fail. But the visit of the magi is an alternative narrative of God with us in gentle ways.

The magi actually get it wrong at first and try to find Jesus in Jerusalem since it was a central hub in that time. They realize after hearing from Herod's advisors that Jesus is actually in Bethlehem (Remember that Micah 5:2 begins "But you, O Bethlehem... From you shall come forth for me the one who is to rule in Israel"). The advisors point out that God chooses a small baby born in the small city of Bethlehem rather than a powerful King. This is an error of about nine miles but yet the magi almost missed Jesus because they headed to wrong place. They expected God to come in one way or in one place, and misinterpreted the signs. We too get the stories wrong and interpret signs incorrectly as well. But we need to be open to the leading from unexpected places and unexpected ways – even if it enemy advisors and magical stars.

So we are left with signs of an unexpected and counter cultural kingdom of God, fearful kings and trusting magi who are following signs. These signs that led the magi to Jesus begin the season of Epiphany. As we think about the start of this New Year, what signs will we want to follow, and what signs we will want to be for

others? As we start a new year what will our story be as a church with new projects, using our resources and forming our mission statement? This story teaches us to expect to encounter joy and fear in the face of Jesus' message for all people, and that we might sometimes get that message wrong. In the coming year I hope that what we choose to guide us will call us to "Arise, and Shine," "for our light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon us." Amen.