

## Sermon for Epiphany, January 7, 2024

What a story! The story of the Magi only appears in Matthew's gospel. We don't know anything much about them, except they were astrologers from the east. I imagine the royal astrologers, in a tower in Persia somewhere, studying the heavens. They see signs that a great king, maybe the greatest king ever, is going to be born in Judea and rule the whole world. They get very excited. Some of them decide to go and see this baby. I imagine most of the others thought they were crazy. "It's a long way. The road is hard and dangerous, even without bandits. It'll be cold. Expensive. Not worth it." Most of them stayed home. They were happy in their ivory towers to know this king was being born but they weren't going to let that upset their comfortable lives or the way they lived.

But some of them set out. We don't actually know how many. And it was a long trip and it was dangerous and there probably were bandits. And I bet there were times when they remembered what their colleagues said and thought they were probably right. Some of them may even have turned back. But the others finally arrived in Judea and then in Jerusalem and they went to the palace of King Herod, and told him what they'd seen and where they'd come from. And it never occurred to them that the new king wouldn't be born in the king's palace.

King Herod was pretty upset by this. Since he hadn't had any kids lately, he called his wise men to find out what this was all about. And they said, "It must be the Messiah, at last. And he will be born in Bethlehem." There were probably pretty excited. Herod was excited, too, but in a different way. Herod was afraid. He saw this Messiah as a threat. He saw his own power disappearing. He didn't want to give up anything to the Messiah. He probably wasn't even Jewish, but as I read this passage again this time, it occurred to me that he believed in the Messiah. At least, he had enough faith to be deathly afraid. He knew the encounter would change his life.

Of course, he tries to trick the magi into leading him to this baby Messiah, but they're too smart for that. But he sends them to Bethlehem and there they find the baby Jesus. And they are overjoyed. And they offer their gifts. And they go home another way. It was undoubtedly worth it to have made that long trip. Only they'll never be able to go back to their old lives, because their encounter with Jesus has changed them.

They head back, Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt, making Jesus a refugee child, living in a foreign land, and King Herod has a fit of rage and kills all the children under the age of 2 in and around Bethlehem. And after Herod dies, Mary and Joseph are afraid to go home to Bethlehem, so they settle in Galilee, in the tiny town of Nazareth on the edge of nowhere. So tiny and obscure that archaeologists have only just figured out where it was.

Here you have 3 different responses to the news of the birth of the Messiah, all from people who believe. You have the Magi who are gung ho to completely disrupt their whole lives and go on a long, dangerous, expensive quest for this child, and when they find him, they are fully satisfied and changed by the encounter. You have the other Magi who are

interested but have no intention whatsoever of changing anything in their comfortable lives. They stay home and keep on as usual.

And you have King Herod, who believes, and tries to stamp out any threat to his power and authority. He takes active steps to be sure that this Messiah doesn't upset his way of life. And he doesn't care who he takes down to accomplish this, even a bunch of babies. These three responses to the good news of the gospel, to God doing new work in the world, haven't actually changed all that much over the years. Follow, ignore or stamp out to maintain the status quo.

Have you ever noticed that God works in surprising ways? It never even occurred to these wise men that the new King wouldn't be born in the King's palace. But Jesus was born in a barn in Bethlehem. At least, according to Luke's gospel. And even though the prophecies for centuries had said that the coming King would be a light to the Gentiles, that all the nations would stream to Jerusalem for the blessing of the true King of Israel, and even though these Gentile magi came, led by a sign God sent especially to them, even though Jesus had regularly spoken with Gentiles, healed Gentiles, and so on, in spite of all this, the disciples never really considered the possibility that the gospel was for Gentiles, too. When Peter was talking to some Romans and the Spirit came upon them, he was surprised, but he baptised them. He was called on the carpet and everyone was surprised by his story. And they're still surprised, later, when St. Paul starts preaching to Gentiles and including them on an equal basis in the church, which we read about today in Ephesians.

Human beings tend to like things to be comfortable and predictable. And if they're comfortable, we don't tend to be that open to changing them. You know the joke: How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb? One to change it and all the rest to say they liked the old one better! But God is constantly behaving in unexpected ways. God doesn't seem to respect our desire for comfort and predictability.

God wants us to grow. And growth requires change. One of my cousins was born with Turner's syndrome, which means that her long bones didn't grow properly. When she was quite young, her parents noticed that she wasn't growing properly so they took her to doctors and found out what the problem was, and to some degree were able to correct it. Back then, medicine hadn't advanced as much as it has today. But they knew there was something really wrong with her because she didn't grow. Children are supposed to grow.

It's the same with our spiritual lives. We are supposed to grow. And growth means change. It means learning new things. It means letting God act in surprising ways in our lives. And we find ourselves doing things we never thought we would do. In my life, I have found that any time I start getting into a rut, getting too comfortable, God comes along and starts prodding me to get up and venture out, like the Magi, into unknown territory. And, yes, those times of growth and change are usually hard, challenging, like the Magi's journey. But also worth it, like the Magi's journey. And, like them, I am never the same again.

And this is also true of our churches. We can get very used to the same patterns unfolding in our churches until we feel that's the only way it could ever be. But then things

change. Sometimes those are just the regular things that arise in life, kind of randomly, like Covid. Sometimes it's people's choices, like the choice of a couple generations not to keep going to church, which has seriously upset our patterns. And sometimes it's God's doing. Sometimes God is prodding us to get out of our comfort zones and out of our ruts and look around at what he's doing.

Kind of like sending that star. Not everyone noticed it, of course, or understood its message, and those who did were free to ignore it, but others got it. Kind of like sending the Spirit on those Romans, as a sign of what God was up to. And St. Peter noticed it and acted along with it, and changed the way he behaved, mostly, after that. It took a few such signs, before the church settled it in their minds that the Good News was for everyone. Actually, we're still struggling with that. It was only in our lifetimes that women could be ordained in our church. Only in recent times that we have started welcoming the 2SLGBTQ+ community on equal terms. We keep thinking the gospel or church is only for "us" and not for "those other people." And God keeps sending signs to wake us up and change our ways.

So here's the question for you. Emmanuel has been pretty comfortable for some years now, though we've declined in numbers. But we've chugged along and done good work. We did what God was calling us to do, and did it pretty well. We've made it through the pandemic. And now what? I know some people think there's not much hope for the future, but I don't believe that's true. Instead, I see a lot of signs that God is actively at work here. Kind of like the star showed a new action of God to the Magi. I see signs of God at work here, bringing to birth something new, Jesus being born among us in a new way.

We are now growing again. For the past two years, God has been sending new people to our church. Those people are getting involved and taking responsibility. A lot is happening. We are doing most of the things we used to do, with new people stepping up to make them happen. We are doing some new things we've never done before and they're succeeding. There is a loving and welcoming spirit here. All these are signs that God is actively working in this church to bring something new to birth. Signs that God will prosper us like the reading from Isaiah this morning.

The question for us in the coming days is this: will we respond like the Magi who left their palaces, their comfortable routines, their predictable lives, and follow these signs to find the promised Messiah, born anew to us, to find the new work God is doing among us? Are we willing to be disrupted by God? Are we willing to try new things, to do old things in new ways, to grow in our faith and practice? Are we willing to let go of some of our old ways, not the core of our faith, but our cliques, control, and try new ways that involve truly listening to each other changing some things? Welcoming new ideas? Welcoming whatever it is that God is giving birth to in our midst.

Because, if we are, then I believe we will not be disappointed. Whatever we have given up will be more than compensated for by what we gain. And we will thrive in this community, doing God's same work in new ways, new ways of bringing God's love to this community, shining like a light in the darkness. And we will forget that we ever wanted to cling to our comfortable routines.

God is calling us to let something new be born in us. God is calling us to let our light shine in this community, in new ways. God is calling us to broaden the scope of our love. God is calling us, once again, to leave our old lives, our old selves, behind and follow Jesus. Follow Jesus into the unknown, trusting that he knows where he is leading us, even if we don't. This new year, let our resolution be to follow Jesus like the Magi, closer than we have ever done before. And may the God of peace be with us and bless us as we follow.