

A SIGN TO WHOM?

Matthew 2:1-12

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The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

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(This sermon owes a considerable debt to our mutual friend, the late K.C. Ptomey, and borrows from a sermon he preached on this text 21 years ago at the Westminster Presbyterian Church of Nashville, Tennessee.)

One of the intriguing places of my childhood along the Florida Gulf Coast was Tarpon Springs. That little coastal village held a mysterious and magical fascination for me. Before Cuban refugees began flooding our area when Fidel Castro came to power, the largely Greek citizens of Tarpon Springs provided my only contact with an immigrant population. Tarpon Springs was located along the Gulf of Mexico's liveliest sponge beds, and perhaps once a year we would drive the fifteen miles to Tarpon Springs to ride a sponge boat and watch the divers bring up the sponges, and then have lunch in one of the Greek restaurants.

We would make that drive again every winter, on the sixth of January, for the annual diving for the cross on the day of Epiphany. A Greek Orthodox bishop, impressively dressed and standing in a boat, would toss a silver cross into the water of Spring Bayou, and hundreds of boys and young men would brave the cold waters to dive for the cross. The one who brought it up was supposedly guaranteed a year of good fortune.

To this day, mention Epiphany to me, and those are the images that come to mind. My home church didn't celebrate Epiphany. For that matter, we didn't celebrate Advent or Lent or Pentecost either; I grew up in a plain vanilla, pre-ecumenical Presbyterian Church. So, it was years later that I finally learned the significance of its celebration – that it is an unveiling, a surprising revelation.

Last year I saw for the first time a cartoon that depicted a French café, slightly resembling Claudette's down the avenue, with tables on the sidewalk outside. One diner is saying, "These eggs are astonishing!" A second says, "It's a caffeine miracle!" and a third virtually shouts, "Now I understand hashbrowns!" The caption says, "Breakfast at Epiphany's."¹

For the purposes of the Christian faith, though, Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas, when we celebrate the visit of those Magi to the Christ child, the day we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the non-Jewish world of the Gentiles as represented by the wise men from the east. Mysterious figures, to be sure. What we *don't know* about the wise men far exceeds what we do know.

¹ See it here: <https://me.me/i/mc-new1-understand-hash-brans-breakfast-at-epiphanys-breakfast-at-6846167>

For example, how many were there? If we say “three,” we are certainly in line with the tradition, but the truth is, the Bible doesn’t say. It does say that three gifts were brought to the Christ-child, and I suppose folks just surmised that there were three gift-bearers. But in the Christian tradition there have been as few as two mentioned and as many as twelve. *The Far Side’s* Gary Larson once argued that “Unbeknownst to most theologians, there was a Fourth Wise Man, who was turned away for bringing a fruitcake.” Matthew doesn’t give a number; he simply says, “Wise men from the east...”

We also don’t know how the magi traveled. If you are thinking “camels,” you’ve probably been looking at our stack of Christmas cards. But Matthew never mentions camels or any other animals. The fact of the matter is, they might have walked. One early Christian artist depicted them riding on horses, but so far, Hallmark hasn’t put his work on any Christmas cards that I’ve seen.

And their names? The names we know best, of course, are Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar, but those names weren’t offered up until the eighth century. Matthew, the only Gospel to mention the wise men, never offers their names.

The truth is, we don’t know much about these visitors at all. But they are such mysterious characters that it is little wonder so many stories and legends have grown up around them. Of course, most of those stories have no roots in the Biblical story and thus tend to obscure the meanings Matthew is trying to communicate in his account.

What we *do know* is that the Magi came from the East, and thus that they were Gentiles, not Jews. We know they had a star to guide them, but not so precisely that they didn’t have to ask for directions from Herod and his constituents. And we know that Herod and his constituents and the magi had one thing in common: they were *all* recipients of the “epiphany” we celebrate on this Twelfth Night, this last day of Christmas. *Epiphany* – the revelation of God in the Christ-child to the magi... and thus to the Gentiles. That is, to people like us.

Herod and his entourage are not Gentiles; they are Jews, yet they receive a revelation of the birth of the child, too. Oddly enough, they receive it from the magi when they pay a visit to the king of the Jews to find out where the new King has been born; only then do Herod and his scholars discover that they have had that news all along in their scriptures. You see, these are people who gathered every Sabbath around the Book, the law and the prophets and wisdom. And yet they do not know, do not understand. Herod, representing the entire religious establishment, is surprised when the Wise Men come seeking the Christ-child.

The magi, on the other hand, do *not* have the scriptures. They do not have access to the traditions of Judaism and its ancient wisdom. Their epiphany comes in nature, in the form of a leading star. Also, since they are not Jews, they would seem the least likely persons to receive a revelation. The popular wisdom of that day said that only the chosen people, God’s elect, could receive this revelation. Yet here are outsiders, Gentiles, who see a star, rightly interpret its meaning, and go in search of the One whose birth it announces. All through the Old Testament there are times when God chooses outsiders as instruments of the divine will, but still, the coming of the Magi seems to surprise people.

And herein, as K.C. Ptomey noted, is the truly clever part of Matthew's way of telling the story. Neither of these groups – neither Herod nor the magi – have everything they need to find the child. The people with the scriptures need the outsiders to help them understand. The outsiders, with the natural revelation in the stars, need the scriptures to help them understand what it is that is being revealed. Matthew's stunning point seems to be that God's truth is revealed to Jew and Gentile alike, but to each only partially. Religious insiders and religious outsiders need each other in order fully to understand the manifestation of God's truth. Another way to say it is this: God has a way of working outside the religious establishment as well as within it. Religious folks do not have the corner on God's truth.

Matthew is not content to make this point only in chapter two. He keeps coming back to it again and again throughout his gospel. For example, he tells of a Canaanite woman, a Gentile foreigner, who comes to Jesus seeking help for her child. Jesus says to her rather curtly, "I came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, not for foreign dogs like you." But she catches him with her reply, "But Lord, even the dogs are allowed the crumbs that fall from the master's table." And Jesus responds, "Woman, great is your faith." (15:21 ff.)

At another point, Matthew tells of a centurion who approaches Jesus because he has a servant who has been paralyzed. The man does not dare invite Jesus to his home, for he knows Jews are not allowed to be in that close contact with Gentiles. So, he says to Jesus, "Only say the word, and my servant will be healed." And Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith." (8:5 ff.)

Then, too, the centurion on watch at Jesus' crucifixion. Seeing what happens at Golgotha he proclaims, "Truly this man was the Son of God." (27:54)

Matthew simply cannot let go of this important point. He wants us so to understand. God's revelation is not limited to any one nation or one religion or one people. When God's Messiah, God's Son, comes into the world, his revelation of truth and love and goodness is not constrained by narrow human boundaries. It is available to all people... to *all* people. The sign of the star is a sign to all.

The story of the magi has an edge to it, I believe, that speaks to what has been going on in recent years in our increasingly globalized world, and particularly in our own culture. Our nation has become increasingly religiously pluralistic, and it surely won't be long before Christianity ceases to be the dominant faith in America. At the same time, our culture has become increasingly secularized and divided, so raising voices of faith and conscience seems at times to be about as effective as whistling into the wind, especially given the way such conscience has been distorted or abandoned by those who speak the loudest.

Now, some folks have felt the need to circle the theological wagons to protect themselves against what appears, to some, to be the "enemy." There have been voices in most every branch of the church calling us to do so, to perpetuate an "us/them" frame of mind and to wage war. It is as though folks think God can not reveal God's grace and goodness and truth to anyone but them! Or that God cannot be at work in the so-called "secular" world or in the world of those

“others” some deem as heretics. Matthew’s wonderful story of the magi should give us reason to pause and to think critically on such an attitude.

Now, let me be clear. Do I believe that Jesus is the light of the world? Yes, I do. Do I believe that Christ is the eternal Word made flesh? Yes. Do I believe he is the way, the truth, and the life? Yes, I do. And I believe that if the world would only live after the manner of Christ’s compassion, peace, and grace, we would not be in the mess in which we find ourselves in these dark days.

But I also believe that God is larger than I can conceive God to be. I know from our history that God uses people outside our circle to judge us, to teach us, to humble us at times, and to remind us of who we are meant to be. I think it happens globally to nations and leaders that assume too much and claim too much and act too much as though they are the only ones who count. I know it happens to religious people who do the same. Arrogance in such matters is a sad and dangerous thing, as God’s own chosen people learned once – at Bethlehem – when it took some outsiders to help them see the light... light that shone like a bright-beaming star above a rude stable... a guiding star that still shines... for those who have eyes to see.