

Walking with the Wise
Epiphany of the Lord Sunday
January 4, 2015
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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Focus: like the magi, we can give and receive the gift of calling forth Christ's reign.

Function: move the congregation to posture themselves towards gifts in others.

...That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse. -Whitman

Proverbs 13:20 – “The one who walks with the wise grows wise...but a companion of fools suffers harm.”

Do you ever wonder about what we do here?

We gather together to listen to pieces of an old book, and we try to let it shape our lives and our life together. Strange, huh? Some might even call it foolish.

Each of us is hoping to encounter something greater than ourselves. We are hoping to hear the communication of an invisible being, to see life beyond this life—or above and around it, deeper than this life. A different quality of life.

Or we're just here. We've forgotten why. Maybe we can come up with some reasons if we think about it... but it gets caught up in the routines of our life and its sometimes hard to articulate.

But here we are, listening to these excerpts from a big old book. And many of you could tell of times you caught glimpses, heard something, found strength, or found space, or had your life opened in new ways—both painful and wonderful—by sitting here, together, listening to passages from this book. (the togetherness of it is strong)

A little strange. A little wonderful... I don't want to follow this thread too far, but I do want to locate ourselves this morning. Here we are.

And here I am, without a robe, without a tie, wearing an ordinary sweatshirt... I wonder if you expected something different? Maybe you thought the person bringing the message would look different? If so, tuck that experience somewhere—it might be helpful to what I'm trying to see and share about this story of the wise men on this Sunday we call Epiphany.

You've heard it once already this morning. I'd like to take a closer look. It's in your pew bibles on page 783, right at the beginning of the New Testament. Matthew chapter 2, starting with verse 1. [READ v. 1]

Did you notice the small letter "g" by wise men? If you look down below for that small letter "g" in the footnotes, you see it says "Or astrologers; Gk magi". Magi, it turns out, is a catch-all term that the Babylonian peoples used for someone with insight or power—a priest, physician, teacher, sage, astrologer... not necessarily a man, though likely at this time – but that's not the point. The point is that they were wise—people with insight who could read the signs of the times.

There's a proverb that says, "The one who walks with the wise grows wise..." I'd like to *walk with the wise* from this story—these magi—and see what we might learn.

So they came "from the East to Jerusalem," it says, "asking '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.'"

As we walk with them we notice two things right away. These people are foreigners. And these people are astrologers—those who study the stars, and are able to read predictions from them.

Astrology in our world is a little bit of a strange thing isn't it? We don't put a lot of stock in it—especially because much of it is peddled for profit in daily horoscopes. And we think of it as bad since it is often closely linked with witchcraft and divination, which is condemned in the Bible. Devout Jews would know that for-telling or interpreting signs is a "no no" in the law (Leviticus 19:26),

But here are astrologers from a foreign land and they come with powerful knowledge -- "A child king has been born here. Where is he?"

- 1 So first, when we walk with the wise, we see that *what we do matters!* Our job, our occupation, who we are will be used by God to show the kingdom if we are open and paying attention. Sometimes religious-types imply that some jobs are more in line with God's will than others—that jobs in the church are more spiritual than jobs in a factory, or grocery store, or school, but this story doesn't indicate that at all. In fact, it's quite the opposite. You don't have to change who you are or what you do to be used in God's drama – do what you do, be who you are and God's light will shine for you and through you. The wise men were astrologers – those who predict the times by looking at the stars – And they were outsiders—not even within the circle of God's promise... so thought the Jews. God used foreign astrologers to open our eyes to a king among us.

Lets continue our journey with the magi.

Verse 3 – “When Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him...”

Stop for a second. When Herod and Jerusalem hear this they experience FEAR.

v.10 – “when they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with JOY.

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”

I’m curious – what allows them to experience joy when they come to find this ordinary child who needs his mother? (one of many ordinary children at that time who needed their mothers).

After reading Isaiah, it’s hard to believe that this would be the fulfillment of this prophecy—a quiet day in a small town, some simple young mother (surrounded by piles of laundry, apron on -- dusted with flour, mixing spoon in hand, holding a child on her hip)...

[READ Isaiah 60:1-6]

Anyone who was expecting this prophecy about the salvation of Israel would have been expecting something grand, something great and bright, something powerful, multitudes gathering, lots of noise, lots of fanfare, music, celebration, money...

But here are the magi, after a long journey, after following a sign in the heavens such as they have never seen before...

Don’t you think it would have been a let down to travel that whole way—invest significant energy—only to find a peasant child with his young mother? What did they have that allowed their hearts to be filled with joy?

Belief.

The expectancy that the significant might be found in any ordinary place or person.

- 2 When we walk with the wise, we see that *what we believe matters*.
I wonder if they were ever tempted to turn back. To say, “this is stupid – it’s not worth our time – and how do we know anyway?”
But they believed, and that allowed them to participate, and participate with joy.

(Augustine famously said, “I don’t seek to understand in order to believe, but I believe in order to see.”)

Their belief opened their eyes to see in an ordinary child a great and wonderful king.

So “they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

Their belief opened them to the wonder of this ordinary child. But it also opened Mary to the wonder of this ordinary child.

I can imagine that after time, she was also wondering about what this would look like. There was the angel in Luke, and the promise, and her cousin’s miracle pregnancy... but what of all that amid the practical ordinariness of life? The tenderness and frustration of being up late with a crying infant... how exactly was this child extraordinary?

And then, kind of like Bilbo Baggins in the Hobbit, out of the blue there comes a knock on the door which reveals strange travelers—wizards and such, that open her eyes to the significance of the child. She knew from the angel that this child would reign over Israel and save Israel from their sins – but these were foreigners kneeling before her and her child. Their gifts opened her eyes and her heart to the wideness and significance of the child and the promise – not only a king over Israel, but a king over the nations – over the whole world.

Their eyes are opened by belief; her eyes are opened by their belief – hearts expand in this shared moment, as gifts are given.

Gifts of hospitality and homage, dignity and respect, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, yes, and through these gifts insight, confirmation, faith...

All of these gifts came from what they had.
It says “opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts.”

When we walk with the wise, we see that *what we have to give matters*.

So what is in your treasure chest? What do you have to give? It may seem like a lot, or it may seem like not so much. But the gifts you have are the gifts you can give. And when you share your gifts, it’s never just the gold, frankincense, or myrrh that changes hands – it’s multiplied into dignity, respect, insight, confidence, faith, love... the things that make up the economy of God’s kingdom.

The strangers in our story gave from their treasure chests to an ordinary kid.

Dare to believe that the good gifts you have to bring are not wasted on “ordinary people,” and that “ordinary people” may carry within them the light of life.