

SERMON

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Wise men, Kings, Magi...we don't even know what to call them, let alone know what to do with their story. We've heard a version of this story over and over again – often it's part of the Christmas story. It makes sense to lump all the visitors together – shepherds and animals and...these oddballs from the east?

It's one of the ways we harmonize these two accounts of the birth of Jesus – from Luke and Matthew. It gives us enough characters for a Christmas pageant. It gives us the opportunity to create expansive nativities. It gives us a foundation of gift giving at Christmas (and not Epiphany as it used to be). And we get to make jokes about the appropriateness of the gifts when visiting a newborn...even if it is a king.

But what do we make of these visitors? We assume there are three because there are three gifts, but the story doesn't say that. Tradition has made them the ancestors of modern nations – given them names. But Matthew doesn't give us any of that. There's no specific number, there's no ethnic identification. It's not even clear they are all men. It simply describes the visit of a group of people whose home is somewhere east of Jerusalem. Technically, there's a **lot** east of Jerusalem but we start to make assumptions about who they are. We domesticate them into our view of the world – most easily naming them as kings because that makes Jesus' birth that much more important...from a human point of view.

The Greek word is “magoi” and that doesn't say much about who they were, but it says a whole bunch about who they were **not**. Specifically, they were not part of the ruling class of occupied Israel.

You can almost feel the tension when they walk into Herod's space and say, “We're here to worship the **new** Jewish king!” I imagine they were pretty excited, and I imagine that Herod...was not. Maybe he's in his throne room with all the elite members of Jerusalem society gathered around him – the priestly class and the legal authorities – everyone who shares in the favor of Rome through him. And all of Jerusalem was afraid of what would come next.

Herod was afraid because this astrologically foretold circumstance could mean one of two things: either Rome had determined it was time to appoint a new king to rule instead of him, or the people were about to rebel against him and lift up someone else to rule. Neither of which would mean good things for his longevity and privilege.

For Herod, it was all about the privilege of power. He ruled because Rome allowed

him to be “king” and that came with all the perks of the time. But it was not a sure thing, and this pronouncement could very well be the beginning of the end. That end would most likely include the end of his life as well.

Herod was afraid, and all Jerusalem knew how dangerous a fearful Herod could be. We heard the story last week of what Herod does with that fear. When these visitors further thwart him, he decides that every family in the entire region would suffer unimaginable tragedy as he slaughtered the innocent. Whatever the mood was in the room, the moment these magi pronounced their purpose, it was now filled with terror.

And that’s also what these particular visitors are **not**. They are not afraid. They were not caught up in power. They weren’t concerned about Herod’s games, they simply wanted to find the child the star promised. They were there to worship. They were there to witness something new. After that happened, they were told of another path to follow – not just the one that the star gave them, but the warning of a dream – prompting them to travel a different way home.

I’m particularly struck by that image this year – the other road that they travelled having experienced the Christ child, the way they dismiss the power of the world and hold onto God’s path instead. It sets up a pretty clear distinction between how Herod looks at the world and how God **acts** in the world.

Herod’s entire existence is built on privilege and the favor of those who have power. God’s entrance into the world flies in the face of that power. In the mythology of the day, a star wasn’t an unusual sign of a divine anointing, but the humble birth of an ordinary baby was not the way of power. Herod had no idea what to do with this new reality so he fell back on what he knew – fear and destruction.

But his fear, his scheming couldn’t stop the mission of the magi. These oddballs from outside the seat of every recognized power of the day were able to witness what God was doing. They were led to an innocent child who was completely powerless. They were the first, in Matthew’s Gospel, to see that God was rejecting the world’s idea of power in favor of a completely different way of living in hope and love.

So where are we, today, so many years later in this journey to the baby? Are we coming from places of privilege and power, or are we coming from the margin to seek a new way? History and tradition have done their best to institutionalize this story but in a world that is filled with fear and the abuse of power, more so today than even just a few days ago, we need the hope that comes from the margins. God didn’t come to Jerusalem or Rome or Athens – the seats of power – God came to an **occupied** village, to those who

were oppressed in every way.

God chose the powerless. God chose to reveal that choice to those who were far removed from the center. That's the story of epiphany – the revelation we need as the world continues to hold onto power over everything else. We need the story of the oddballs who show up despite the fear at the heart of the system.

We are the oddballs. We don't need to be here. We don't get power or privilege by being in this place. We are here to resist the world's claim to power. We're here to witness God at work and find a different road that is built on hope rather than fear, on love rather than revenge, on grace rather than retribution.

The star led the magi to the baby and an angel sent them from there onto a different road. We've come to the manger and witnessed the birth, where does the road lead us from here? The promise of epiphany is that the road leads us ever forward, down a new path, following the oddball story and the unexpected breaking-in of God in a manger.

The road leads us not to the seats of power, but to the places where fear reigns so that we can see God at work...*places like modern day Bethlehem and Syria, east Africa and the South China Sea, Kiev and Caracas.* The power of this world is no match for what God will do, we just have to follow the right road. Amen.