

## Feast of the Epiphany

Mt 2.1-12

Today's gospel lesson gives us a great way to begin the season of Epiphany, because the story of the visitation of the wise men to the infant Jesus touches on many of the themes we associate with this season of revelations and unveilings. There's only one problem: we have no idea what this story really means.

Oh, we have some theories: biblical scholars have been working on this story for many years now, and we think it might mean this, or perhaps it might mean that, or maybe...well, we're not really sure. This story is actually rather hard to figure out because it stands alone: there's nothing like it in any of the other gospels, or in the rest of the New Testament. Matthew is the only one who mentions it, and even within the context of Matthew its meaning is not immediately apparent. Who are these guys, and what are they doing there? They appear out of nowhere, and then disappear just as quickly.

Now, right there we have an Epiphany lesson: the principle theme of the season of Epiphany is the showing forth of the glory of God in the world, and one thing this morning's gospel demonstrates is that the showing forth of God's glory in the world is not always easy to understand. Just like this story: from out of nowhere, these guys show up, do their thing, and then they're gone, never to be heard from again.

What just happened? What exactly was the purpose of their visit? What happened to them after they went home? Were their lives forever changed by their encounter with the one who was born king of the Jews, or did they soon forget about their visit to the land of Judah? Oftentimes the showing forth of the glory of God in the world raises as many questions as it does answers.

Here's one way this story has traditionally been interpreted, and I expect you've heard this before: the coming of the wise men symbolizes the revelation of the gospel to the Gentiles. Whoever these guys are, it's almost certain they're not Jews: they're "from the East," and they don't know enough about the stories and traditions of Israel to know where to look for the child, so they ask have to ask for directions. That means they must have been at least one woman with them, because obviously if they were *all* men they would not have stopped to ask for directions.

So they're Gentiles, and their coming signifies the fact that the self-revelation of God in Christ is for all people, not just for Israel. They know nothing about the covenant or the temple or the law, but they bring what they have for an offering: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, symbols of kingship, of priesthood, and of sacrifice. God's glory shines forth in the world, even to those outside the covenant.

That's one way of reading this story, one I expect is quite familiar. But it's not the only way. Here's another way, closely related but nonetheless distinct: the coming of the wise men symbolizes Israel's rejection of the gospel. It's significant that it takes a bunch of Gentiles from somewhere out east to tell Israel that their king has been born. Herod has no clue; nobody in Israel has any clue. Bethlehem is not all that far from Jerusalem, and yet nobody knew. So

there's a bit of a reversal going on here: Israel is supposed to be the light to the nations, but they're not. The nations come to them and tell them what's happening.

And how does Israel respond to the news? The wise men arrive in Jerusalem, and when they ask about the one who has been born king of the Jews, Matthew tells us everyone is thrown into a panic: Herod "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."

Just a quick passing observation: I have to wonder how wise these wise men really were. They show up in Jerusalem looking for a newborn king, and who do they ask for directions? The current king. That doesn't strike me as a very strategic move. "Excuse me, Your Highness, but where can I find the one who's going to take your place as the ruler of your people?" Maybe not the best person to ask.

Because, lo and behold, that's exactly how Herod reacts, isn't it? "Oh, yes, by all means, go and search for the child, and when you find him bring word to me so that I too may go and pay him homage with this here sword." That's what Herod has in mind. What's the next thing that happens in Matthew's gospel, after the wise men return home? Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with Jesus because they're warned Herod is coming for the child, and he does. And then, says Matthew, then "was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refuses to be consoled because they are no more.'" God's glory shines forth in the world, and God's own people do their level best to snuff it out.

That's another way of reading this story, maybe not as happy as the first way but nonetheless carrying an important lesson. The lesson here is that we don't always welcome the glory of God when it shines forth in our lives. We don't like it when strangers show up to tell us what God is doing, because we've got God well and truly figured out, thank you very much. The revelation of God's glory is an occasion for thanksgiving, but it's also often an occasion for judgment.

Here is yet a third way of reading this story, and this one, I think, is especially interesting because it potentially has immediate relevance for our lives. One biblical commentator, a guy named William Albright, has suggested that the visit of the wise men gives us an image of what it means to surrender our lives to Christ.

We don't know much about these guys, but it seems one thing we are meant to know is that they were astronomers, or maybe it would be better just to come right out and call them astrologers: "We observed his star at its rising." Albright argues that gold, frankincense, and myrrh were part of the "common stock-in-trade" of the magi or the astrologers of the day: "magical charms," for example, "were written with myrrh ink." What this suggests, says Albright, is that the gifts they present to Jesus were not intended as symbols of homage; they were "declarations of dissociation from former practices."

In other words, the wise men recognized that the one who had been born king of the Jews was also the one they had been searching for amongst the stars, and now that he had come they were ready to abandon their former way of life. By giving their gifts to Jesus they were saying, "We have been searching for the truth and now we have found it, so we realize we need to search no

longer. Here are the tools of our trade: it is now for you to tell us what to do with them.”

I find that to be a rather creative approach to this story. I’m not sure I buy it entirely; I think the wider context of Matthew’s gospel argues for a slightly different reading. But is there nonetheless a lesson we might draw from this interpretation? Yes, absolutely: there’s something here that not only helps us understand the story but also helps us reflect on our response to the showing forth of God in the world, the epiphany of God in the midst of his people.

We may already know that the gospel has been revealed to the Gentiles; we may already know that the gospel is not always welcome by all who hear it. But there is always room in our lives to surrender more of ourselves when God shows up and becomes manifest in our lives in a new and unexpected way.

What are the tools of your trade, the implements by which you live your life? I don’t just mean your professional life, I mean the stuff that’s really important, the stuff you use to guide you in your search for truth. The object of your search, the light at the end of that tunnel, the star shining on the edge of that horizon, is the one who was born the king of the Jews.

And when we see his star rising in our lives, the best we can do is go and pay him homage, to bring forth the treasures of our lives and offer them to him and say, “I have been searching for the truth, and now that I have found you I realize I need not search any longer. Here are the tools of my trade; it is now for you to tell me what to do with them.”

Over the next several weeks, we’ll be hearing a lot about the showing forth of the glory of God in the world. Be listening for those occasions that shine in your heart and in your mind with the clarity of a star; that’s God calling to you. That’s God inviting you to grow in faith by opening more of your life to him. When that time comes, when that opportunity presents itself, remember the example of these wise men from the East and hasten to offer your gift to him, and you will see his glory, “full of grace and truth,” and from his glory you will receive “grace upon grace” (Jn 1.14-16). Amen.

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