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Drawing Near to Jesus
Matthew 2:1-16

This morning is the Sunday we call “Epiphany,” a word which means “revelation.” Think of being hard at thought, and suddenly having “an epiphany,” an insight, a vision, a spirit-inspired inspiration. Epiphany is the Sunday we celebrate Christ’s revelation to Gentiles, to the wise men of old.

In 1991, Mary Ann and I, like the wise men, journeyed to Bethlehem, to visit the church of the Nativity built on the traditional site of Jesus’ birth. Ironically Israeli soldiers, armed with submachine guns, guard the birthplace of the Prince of Peace. Entering the five-foot high door, we must stoop. We can’t near Jesus’ birthplace without bending in homage to the King of kings. Then we enter the tiny basement room, lit by flickering candles, and drenched in the smell of incense.

A group of Germans enter and sing, “Stille Nacht.” A group of Mexicans, dressed in serapes, enter and pray in Spanish. A group of elderly Polish women, dressed in black, enter and, weeping, fervently kiss the altar. As we watch, I think of how, despite our differences, we all have the same needs, spiritual hungers, and dreams. Like the wise men, we search for love, and meaning, and hope.

Much of what we assume about Epiphany isn’t actually in Scripture. We assume there are three wise men because three gifts are offered, but we don’t really know. Legend says the wise men are Persian astrologers. All we know is that vaguely “they are wise men from the east.” The names Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar come from a sixth century Greek manuscript. And it’s not said that they are kings, although try convincing third-grade boys who want to wear a crown and their father’s best bathrobe for the church’s Christmas pageant. But let’s listen to the story as told by Matthew:

Matthew 2:1-16

Our story is rich in meaning. Who visits Jesus the night of his birth? -- Humble shepherds. Luke’s world is the world of poor peasants, of Jesus being placed in a feeding trough, of lowly, night-shift workers lacking any respect. Now God draws powerful wise men to Jesus’ side. So Jesus comes for the poor and rich, for Jew and Gentile, for the illiterate and the highly educated. Matthew’s world is the world of King Herod, chief priests and foreign powerbrokers.

What world do we live in? In 1994, one of my close friends had his church destroyed by the Northridge earthquake. Then weeks of aftershocks leave everyone literally “shaky.” If a couple has marital problems, now they really have

problems. If a person is depressed, now they need double to their Prozac. If two persons disagree on a church committee, now they go to war. This all descends on Pastor Ken, "Fix this building and fix us." Finally Ken resigns and, for two years, becomes a long distant truck driver. Talk about entering a different world – wrestling an 18 wheeler over the Rockies in a sleet storm, getting paid 25 cents a mile but getting nothing when it takes four hours to load and unload the truck, having two days off, but being in Tupelo, MS or Bangor, ME, far from his family.

We get isolated in our comfortable, middle-class, suburban world, where our pantries are full, where a hard choice is which of 600 channels to watch, and where we have top-notch medical care. So many live in very different worlds – in refugee camps, in war zones, in cancer units, in gun-riddled neighborhoods.

But we all need Jesus' love, forgiveness, guidance, peace and power. The wise men's coming at the beginning of Matthew anticipates the risen Christ giving the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, "*Go make disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching in my name.*" Our call, then, is to look beyond our little world to the worlds inhabited by the least of our brothers and brothers.

Jesus loves each of us. So our value isn't derived from our grades, bank account, degrees, community standing or reputation. Our value, self-worth and identity derive from being a person whom Jesus loves and for whom He has died. In Jesus' eyes, a street child in Buenos Aires has the same value as the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. That is our mandate to serve!

Our story opens with the wise men following a star, seeking *the One who is born the King of the Jews*. And here Matthew critiques astrology. The stars don't determine our fate; rather, they are signs of God's creative power and under His control. As the Psalmist confesses, "*Lord, our Lord . . . when I consider the heavens, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what are we mere humans that you care for us?*"

Francis Collins, the director of the human genome project, becomes a Christian as he ponders two things. First, he thinks of our innate sense of right and wrong, where even a child says, "*that's not fair,*" if her brother takes a bigger piece of birthday cake. And second, he considers the marvelous intricacy of the universe, its order, complexity, and wonder. Nature reveals the glory of God.

But Matthew's readers must be shocked when astrologers appear on the scene. Since many ancients identify stars with divinity, Scripture condemns such idolatry. "*Do not bow down to the sky, the moon and stars, and do not worship them.*" And who is a magician, derived from the word "magi?" A magician is a trickster, an illusionist, one whose livelihood comes from fooling us. So a magi can't be trusted. But God draws pagan astrologers to Jesus by sheer grace to tell us that none of us are beyond our Lord's care and concern.

Most of us struggle with grace, with believing that God's love is free, unmerited and without strings. Tim Keller distinguishes between religion and the true gospel. Religion says, "I obey; therefore I'm accepted." The Gospel says, "I'm accepted, therefore I obey." Religion says, "Motivation is based on fear." The Gospel says, "Motivation is based on grateful joy." Religion says, "When I'm criticized, I'm devastated." The Gospel says, "Criticism is hard, but my identity is built not on my performance, but on God's love for me in Christ." Religion says, "Since I work so hard to be moral, I look down on those who are lazy and immoral." The Gospel says, "Since Jesus died for my sins, I am who I am by sheer grace, so I can't look down on any others. I can only love them."

So summoned by grace, the magi come following a star and they end up in the court of Herod, a cruel, malevolent, Roman loyalist, who has ruled Judea for some 30 years. Herod kills so many members of his family that Caesar says, "*I'd rather be Herod's pig than his son.*" What an irony! Herod, the King of the Jews, has murder on his mind, while pagan astrologers follow the light and end up worshipping the Christ child.

Herod's example warns us to never be naïve about evil. Herod is the King of the Jews, so he gets enraged when he hears that title applied to a newborn child. Soon he orders the execution of every young male child in the area. Whether the evil is Isis, human trafficking, adultery, child abuse, or even gossip, evil is a spreading cancer unless it is identified and opposed. It is well said that, "the only thing necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing."

But now the magi get stuck. They've come most of the way towards Jesus, but they can go no further. Nature tells us many things about God. We see God's majesty in a scarlet sunset; we see God's love of beauty in the blossoming of a velvet rose; we see God's creative genius in the intricacy of our human bodies; we see God's love in our capacity for intimate relationships. But nature tells us nothing of Jesus or how to live or about what is right and wrong.

So we need God's specific revelation in Jesus, the Word made flesh, and in Scripture, the written word of God. There we hear God's will, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" "*Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*" "*Be kind and tender-hearted, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you.*" To understand God we need both nature and Scripture!

So Herod calls together the chief priests and religious scholars to ask, "Where is this King of the Jews to be born?" But sadly, these religious scholars have no clue about what God is doing. They memorize the Scriptures, teach their meaning, debate the fine points of the law, but totally miss God's will and way!

On 9/11, I was attending a Presbytery meeting at a lovely camp, nestled near Lake Michigan. Then reports begin coming in that planes had hit the World Trade Center. Then we hear of the collapse of Tower 2, and then the collapse of Tower

1. But the moderator continues the meeting. We all grow restless. Finally someone asks, "Shouldn't we pray." And the moderator looks at her watch and says, "Well, we're already six minutes behind the docket. Why don't we have a prayer just before lunch?" At that several of us get up and go outside to pray, and then a voice says to me, "Get home now!" For soon we realize that it is a day that rivals Pearl Harbor. We can read the Scriptures, attend worship, and go to Bible Studies, but unless our hearts and minds are engaged, we can totally miss what God is about and what God is doing.

The scholars consult the Scriptures and announce, "The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem." So, with sinister intent, Herod tells the magi, "*Go, search for the child, and when you find him, tell me, so I too may come and worship him.*" And the magi go to Bethlehem and offer their prophetic gifts: gold, the gift for a king; frankincense, used by priests in their temple sacrifices, and somberly, myrrh, used to embalm bodies. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they return to their country by another route.

Our story is a portrait of God's grace. We are all invited to Jesus' side, rich and poor, old and young, educated and illiterate, respected and disrespected. It is a challenge to leave our little, comfortable world and venture into other worlds, the worlds of an immigrant, of the homeless, the sick, and the poor. Our story is a challenge to study God's word, for while nature hints at God's identity, we find the meaning of life in Jesus, the living Word, and in Scripture, the written world.

In the face of Herod, we see evil, and evil must be opposed. In the face of the chief priests and scribes, we see the face of complacency, of practicing religion, but not seeking the living God. But in the magi, we see what our God wants to lead us to – to worship. For Jesus offers peace to the anxious, courage to the fearful, hope to the discouraged, strength to the weak, healing to the sick, forgiveness to the sinner, and the capacity to love both ourselves and others. It's said, "*Wise men (and women) still seek Him.*" Let us do exactly that!