

Sermon Mt 2:1-12

Epiphany

January 5th, 2025

When I was little, my grandma watched me and my sister a lot. And my grandmother, a staunch Catholic, had a nativity scene she would put up each year once Advent started. And, the best part, my sister and I were allowed to play around with it! And so from early on, I got acquainted with all the main characters of the story of Jesus' birth: Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the angel, the star, some sheep, the ox, the donkey, and then, of course, baby Jesus in the manger. And the three kings, or wise men, would stand in awe, definitely the most colorful figurines in the set, offering their gifts hidden in gilded small chests. The Christmas story thus became the first story of the Bible I knew.

One year during Advent, I might have been 5 or 6, my mom took me to the local Catholic church. This church had a life sized nativity scene, set up in one of its side chapels, which was quite famous in our region. And I stood in awe, looking up at the so familiar characters of the beloved Christmas story: Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, some shepherds, the angel, the sheep, the ox, the donkey – but then it dawned on me that something was missing. And I asked my mom, where are the three kings?

No matter how hard I looked, they just weren't there. My mom then explained to me that the three kings would be added on Epiphany Day, on January 6, in the new year. I was slightly confused. January 6? That's when grandma takes down her nativity scene, sheep and kings and all, and here, in this church, they are just completing the whole scene. Mom, are you telling me this big nativity scene will be out until way after Christmas? That's weird!

And so I got my first lesson in church seasons, because my mom explained to me that the nativity scene, indeed, would be on display until February 2nd, which, if you do the math, is exactly 40 days after Christmas and in many Christian traditions is observed as Candlemas – and that Candlemas marks the end of Christmas and Epiphany. And I was fascinated that Christmas, in this church,

wouldn't be over and done for quite a while. I was fascinated that the story of Christmas and Epiphany somehow continues. Needless to say, I urged my mom to take me back that church, during the season of Epiphany – I just had to see the whole nativity scene complete, kings and all. I felt like I was in on a secret – that got to celebrate Christmas, as the rest of the world had long put everything looking like Christmas back into storage.

Now in our culture, we tend to stuff the three kings, or rather the magi, as they are called in the Bible, into the story of Jesus' birth. As if everything happened at the exactly same moment: Jesus is born in the stable, then there are shepherds, angels, and the magi happen to appear as all this is taking place, all over the course of one holy night. We tend to place the magi into our nativity scenes, which then are taken down on the day after Epiphany, if not much earlier. We tend to mix the stories together; and they are not even in the same gospel accounts! Luke tells us the story of the birth at Bethlehem, and Matthew puts his emphasis on the story of the magi following the star.

However, if we mix up the stories, and if we just use the magi as some colorful and exotic, but rather meaningless, props, that just disappear once Christmas is over; we miss out on the richness of the story of the magi, and how they are the link between that one holy night and all the days that follow thereafter – how they are the link between the most wonderful time of the year and then all those other not quite so wonderful days we have to deal with. The magi are those who travel to and then travel from the place where the Christ child is. The magi are those who come to find the newborn king, that's their only goal at first – but they soon recognize that this goal becomes a launching pad. The journey isn't over; finding Christ is just the beginning.

Finding Christ is just the beginning. Something happens to those magi, those astrologist, those seekers, as they realize who this new king is – an infant, born to humble parents, the Messiah whose coming has been foretold since ancient times, the Messiah who turns the world around through his own humility and service. A king who is not found in the obvious places, a king who is not found in a palace, but a king who is among his people, and with his people.

And they returned to their own country by a different road, a different way, we read. Many interpret this as the consequence of the dream they had, that they better avoid Herod and his murderous intentions on their way back. But there is more to it. Their ways are changed. Their direction in life has changed. They have seen the child, the king, and how could they do the same old same old after that experience?

And so I think it is very fitting to commemorate and celebrate the magi as we leave yet another Christmas season and transition into a new year. I sometimes wonder why people, even in our day and age, still celebrate the beginning of a new year, and do so quite emotionally. I think most of us have figured out that, just because a new year starts, the slate is not automatically wiped clean, and that there are no magical new beginnings. Yet there is that deep human longing for a fresh, new start, for a new chance. We want to leave the old behind, and go into a new year with hope and a renewed energy. We need those moments when we close the door to a certain period of time and open to door to another. I don't know about you, but I really cherish the opportunity to look back at what was, and to then look forward to what might be. To find closure and to anticipate opportunity. Especially after we, once more, have seen the child, the king, a son given for us. In the child Jesus we see all our hopes personified. Now we need to live into this hope.

And so our journey continues. Finding Christ is just the beginning. We just opened the door to a new year. And, like the magi, we have a choice: taking the same old ways? Or do we allow the mystery of Christmas, the mystery of God made flesh, the mystery of God with us and God through us, to change our ways?

And don't say there is no need for changing our ways – anyone here who has ever had a New Year's resolution? Yeah, I guess we all know that we'd better off and healthier if we kicked certain habits, or add a good habit, if we changed our ways.

Seeing where we are as a society, a nation, with so many divisions and hateful and dehumanizing rhetoric and decisions heavily influenced by the idol of capitalism – living in a world that seems to become less merciful and gracious each and every day, a world that is coming dangerously close to not being able to

sustain life as we know it anymore – I am not very optimistic about the future of humanity if we continue in such ways which seek to divide and destroy. We definitely need some resolutions here.

And what about some spiritual resolutions? How can we change our ways this year, individually – and then as a congregation? Will we trust that, though we may be insecure and maybe even a little scared about potentially changing our ways as we face challenges – like not finding enough people to serve on the church council – will we trust that God is with us, every step along the way? That God will lead us and guide us?

Christmas isn't over. God is coming to us, each and every day, to dwell with us, to be with us. We have heard the story of Jesus' birth – we have seen the king – and our journey continues, away from the manger, and into a world where the presence of Christ, the body of Christ, is needed. The journey ain't over. May we carry the story and the promise of Christmas in our hearts as we continue to walk in the light of God. And may we faithfully and trustingly follow the all the different ways God leads us on.

Amen