

SERMON for Sunday, January 6, 2008
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany

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Found in a Strange Place

In our house, the Christmas decorations were all cleared away on New Year's Day, the rugs vacuumed and the floors swept of all the pine needles – except, of course, the ones that seem to show up in July – and we are ready for a new year to begin, a new year with a clean slate, with cleared counters and tables, with clarity and resolutions for our daily lives. Actually, the reality was that my son Adam was born on January 3rd, and I had to make ready for the birthday party. Said birthday boy is now grown up and living far away, but old habits die hard and New Year's Day is still the day to put Christmas away. But here come the wise men, marching into our cleaned up lives, messing up our tucked away celebration of Christmas with the invitation to follow, to seek, to find and be found.

Who are these visitors to Jesus, who traveled distances, who saw a star? Actually, although they are wonderfully colorful additions to the Christmas pageants, with their glorious costumes of lush fabrics and jeweled accessories, they were not at all in reality what we have made them out to be. There is much hypothesis and myth surrounding these visitors. They were not kings, although they may have been associated with the royal courts of Persia in some tangential way. There is no mention of the number of magi, so we don't know for sure that there were three, only the mention of gold, frankincense and myrrh, three particular gifts. It wasn't until the eighth century that they had names, supplied by St. Bede the Venerable, who called them Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltasar, names with no known significance. One scholar pointed out that in the fourth century the Empress Helena added to the mythology by claiming to have had a vision of the burial site of the three kings. The skulls were removed, and during medieval times relocated, and are on display in Cologne, Germany, one of those holy yet questionable religious destinations. So who are these we call the magi?

I recently saw a bit of a TV news magazine that featured a small town in Florida that is supposedly the epicenter of psychic power. The streets are filled with home offices and storefront sites where you can get your readings by cards and auras and stars, your futures divined and your fortunes calculated by any number of psychic practitioners who sincerely believe that they have the unique gift of future insight and the ability to take your money to tell you what it is. The reporter was somewhat skeptical, as am I, but reserving just a bit of *what if*. *What if they are right, even just once? Will my life be enhanced? Will I make better choices?* Enough people do put some store in the psychics, for law enforcement and crime investigators will sometimes call in those who seem to have extraordinary powers to help solve a crime. Even most of us suspend a bit of our skepticism for the extra sensory, the *feelings* of anticipation we sometimes have.

Were the magi nothing but rather common psychics, ancient stargazers? Uneducated, unsophisticated, the most unlikely visitors to the Holy Family as you could imagine? Well, yes, they were. And they were precisely the ones for whom the star shone, the ones for whom the star still shines, still leads. The travelers from another land were not the religious insiders like the Israelites, they were not the politically powerful like Herod, they were not the ones whose lives were on the straight and narrow path of conventional behavior all the time. Theologians often

speak of the scandal of the gospel, and the gospel writer Matthew is most definitely being scandalous by reporting the visit of the magi. They might be considered intruders, foreigners, quacks – but they followed the star of Jesus to a place where they had never been, and the world was turned upside down. The word *epiphany* means *appearance*, or *showing*, and as we read this story on what we know as the Sunday of the Epiphany, we know that the story of the child in the manger is not over, and we are God is shown to us once again, we see the God-made-flesh in a new light.

This season of Epiphany, which begins today and continues through Ash Wednesday, comes, for us who live in the northern hemisphere, in a cold, dark, and bleak landscape. If we have manufactured any cheer at all for ourselves to tide us over the frantic holidays, that cheer may be gone. If we have basked in the gathered warmth of friends and relatives, they have returned to home and school. If we have put aside the difficulties of finance and the practicalities of daily life, the realities of a new year and taxes and charge-card bills are stacked on our desks. This is even a dark night of the soul for many, when the glow of Christmas Eve candlelight seems to have gone out. Jewish rabbis teach often by story, and Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, tells in his book *Who Needs God?* the famous Hassidic story about a sage who came home from the synagogue one day and found his nine-year-old daughter crying bitterly. He asked her what was wrong, and she told him, between sobs, that she and her friends had been playing hide-and-seek and when it was her turn to hide, she hid so well that they had given up on finding her and went off to play another game. She waited and waited for them to find her, and finally after about an hour, had come out to find herself all alone. As the sage comforted her, he mused to himself, *I wonder if this is how God feels. He threatened that if we abandoned His ways, He would hide His face from us and deprive us of His presence. I wonder if God has managed to hide from us so successfully that we have given up looking for Him and have gone off in other directions. And I wonder if God feels lonely and abandoned.* And Rabbi Kushner continues by asking, *Why is God so hard to find in the modern world?*

The story of the travels of the wise men is a story of hide-and-seek, a story of lost and found. It is starting out on a journey of faith with not much surety, only the guidance of a star. Our own journeys often begin, and continue, when we don't have much to go on. We search when we are confused, anxious, lonely, when our hearts are wandering and empty. We have all been in those places, unsure of what comes next. As I was completing my seminary education – more than few years ago – I and my fellow students were faced with the newly instituted ordination exams of our Presbyterian denomination. Not only did we have to finish our academic work and papers, but we had to sit for a separate set of exams that would evaluate whether or not we were intellectually, psychologically, and spiritually fit for ministry, whether or not we could apply what we had been studying. I will never forget one particular question, that haunted me then and still does. The question was something like this: *A man in the congregation makes an appointment to see you, and in that time pours out his heart's loneliness after the death of his wife. He says that he will not be coming to worship for a while, for he just did not see how he could participate in the prayers of the congregation when he didn't really believe in God anymore. How would you, as the pastor, respond?* This was not simply a question that required a thorough answer from the perspective of counseling and pastoral theology, but a question of worship as well. I don't remember all the things I wrote in that essay answer, but I did pass the exam. I do know I said something about it not mattering if he couldn't pray. He should still come to worship to be with the body of Christ, and

let the ones who surrounded him pray for him, carry his burden with him. Worship wasn't for those with right answers, but for those who were seeking. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard spoke about a *leap of faith*. He said that a leap made by faith is necessary in coming to Christian faith, because there are paradoxes that exist, certain things that cannot be explained by logic or reason. For instance, he argued, how can Jesus be fully God and fully man? Only when we make a leap of faith will we come to a faith in this Jesus. The wise men were guided by a star, but they took a great leap of faith as they set out on what was to be a long journey to Jesus.

What did these seekers of light find? They found the One who was worthy of their gifts and of their adoration. Their gifts were symbolic ones, with gold to represent the royalty of Christ, although not the kingly royalty of earthy thrones. The frankincense was made from the gum of a tree found in Asia and Africa that produces an aromatic smoke used for worship. Myrrh was used to anoint bodies for burial and as a symbol of the suffering and death that would be the destiny of this child. In giving these gifts they gave themselves to Jesus. There is no more poignant depiction than this in the grand story of Christmas, as it is told and retold, as it is detailed and embellished, greater than the angels' song and the shepherds' adoration: *On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage.* They were led by the grandest light of all, not the stars in the sky, but the light of Christ. And they did not find God. God found them.

Isn't that what happens? We can seek, but in the end God finds us where we are, in all our brokenness as well as our wholeness, in all our loneliness as well as in the midst of our gathering together, in all our sadness as well as in our joy, in the dark nights of our lives and in the morning sun. God finds us in wonderfully strange ways and in strange places, and we are blessed.

Our November guest, singer-songwriter Kyle Matthews shares his Epiphany wisdom:

*How do we follow Christmas? How do we endure that show?
How can we face January's Bitter cold?
All of the presents are opened All of the bright lights are gone
Now there is nothing but winter And we must go on Yes, we must go on*

*And welcome the days after Christmas We're ready for winter this year
For we have a light for the darkness A hope for those fears
So welcome the days after Christmas And welcome the challenge of life
For all the days following Christmas Are days meant for following Christ...*

Amen.