

Matthew 2:1-12 “Pagans in the House!”

The Apostle Paul once said our present understanding of God is like seeing through dark or frosted glass. If someone was standing outside a the window, we'd know they were there but we'd have trouble figuring out who it was. It's the same with seeing things in the dark. We can pick up an outline but we can't make out much detail. Think about times in your life when you've made an effort to seek God, but maybe it felt like entering a dark cloud of mystery. We can pick up some general shapes and outlines, but the details are shrouded in the unknown.

Welcome to “Epiphany Sunday,” the last day we gather together as a church to “formally” celebrate Christ’s birth. The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek language and means “appearance” or “revelation.” It’s most often used to speak of either an appearance of a divine being, or of the revelation of an essential truth. That’s how the word gets associated with light. Someone says, “I had an epiphany” and suddenly something is made clear. Sometimes in comic strips, an artist will draw a lightbulb over a person’s head to illustrate an idea or a revelation. The church celebrates Epiphany as the revelation of God's nature and purpose in the appearance of Christ. So today, in the darkness of winter, we come to God seeking an epiphany. We’re asking God to draw a lightbulb over our heads. We’re asking God to pull back the darkness and step into the light, so that, even if only for a short while, we can clearly see the love that God has for us and the purposes for which God is preparing us. We’re looking for an epiphany.

The church traditionally celebrates Epiphany by telling the story of the magi, or the wise men who traveled from the East to visit and worship the Christ Child. Remember, there are only two accounts of Jesus’ birth in the New Testament. One is in Luke and the other is in Matthew. Luke has the shepherds, Matthew has the wise men. The church mashes the two stories together and that’s why we usually get a picture in our minds of this crowded little stable where Luke’s shepherds (usually 2 or 3) and Matthew’s wise men (always 3 even though Matthew never says

how many there were) are all standing in line to see the baby Jesus. Wait-wait-wait, what do you mean Matthew never tells us how many wise-men there are? It's three. No ... there are three gifts: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We don't know how many wise men there were. There were at least two since he uses a plural, but who knows? There could have been 8 or 13 or 22. We don't know. But that's not important. What's important is that Matthew says Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the land of Judea during the time of King Herod the Great. But he doesn't say *why* Mary and Joseph were so far away from home. Luke says they were there for a census that Caesar ordered, but Matthew doesn't give us anything other than a location. Now this was really important for Matthew's mainly Jewish audience. These folks knew their Scriptures forward and backward, so they could tell you for sure that the Messiah was to come from King David's family tree and King David's city, which was Bethlehem. So Matthew makes sure his readers can't miss the fact that Jesus came from *exactly* where the Messiah was expected to come from. Matthew's like that. He likes to give his readers something comfortable to hang on to before he hits them with the big reveal. He gets them feeling all safe and secure with their cherished Hebrew presuppositions and then when they least expect it ... BAM! He hits them with the big surprise.

And he doesn't waste any time here. He just comes right out and says it: "Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star rise in the east and we have come to worship him.'" Now to us, it sounds pretty innocent. But we're familiar with this story, so it doesn't sound too terribly strange. But to a proudly righteous Jew from the first century? This is as bizarre as it is scandalous. They'd hear this story and say, "Now wait, *who* came to Jerusalem? *Magi*?!" The label "Magi" could have had a number of slightly different meanings, but *none of them* would sound right to a devout Jew at the time. At its most basic, innocent definition "magi" refers to those who possesses supernatural knowledge or abilities. A "magus" is a wise one whose special knowledge comes from reading the stars or from other mystical means of divination that are

inaccessible to ordinary people. Think, “Doctor Strange.” In other words “sorcerer,” which *isn't* a good thing in Jewish tradition. The Law of Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy 18:10-12 says, “No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving them out before you.” So there you have it. Okay, so knowing this, try for a moment to get a feel for the kind of impact Matthew’s words have on his audience. In fact, let me help you by telling you a little modern-day parable.

Once upon a time God decided to become human and be born as a baby on earth. He was born, on a Saturday night, to a couple of street kids named Joe and Mary who were camping out in the lawn shed behind the First Methobapticostal Church in Chico, California. The next morning all the regulars turned up for Sunday worship, completely unaware of this little family out in the garage. Half-way through the service, five strangers walked into the sanctuary. They looked like they just got out of the Healing Arts Festival and Psychic Fair in Sacramento. They were all dressed up in robes and loose-fitting beach-yoga-harem looking clothes and had lots of jewelry with strings of crystals around their necks. “Excuse us,” they said, “but we’re from the East Side Mythic Reality New Age Enlightenment Center. We’re looking for the god-child who was born somewhere around this area.” The startled regulars at the church said, “What are you talking about?”

“Well, we’re not sure about the exact details, but Sister Harmony here was reading the Tarot Cards this morning, and the cards clearly said that an omnipotent divine presence had just appeared as a baby near this location. We were a bit surprised at first, but then our brother Star-Fox here spent half an hour calculating the astrological chart for today, and sure enough, there was an unusual conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter last night, and because it was occurring under the sign of Capricorn ... well

... that confirms what Sister Harmony's cards said. So we've come with a big supply of healing crystals and essential oils for this baby." And at that moment a baby's cry was heard from the shed out back, and when they went to investigate, there was Joe, Mary, and a baby named Jesus.

Now this is ridiculous, of course, and if you want to get technical, in Biblical times the Magi probably visited Jesus when he was a toddler instead of a baby, but still ... you get the feel of how the people of Matthew's time might have felt upon hearing this news. They'd want to know what in the world was going on because the use of any form of divination -- astrological or otherwise had long been forbidden to the Israelites. Now the more specific meaning of the word "magus" or "magi" refers to the priests of either Persian or Babylon religions. These priests were the speakers of the sacred words at pagan sacrifices. Again, we're talking a magician or a sorcerer. Magi were people whose activities were repeatedly condemned and prohibited throughout the scriptures and were completely abhorrent to the people of Israel.

But here's Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospel writers, openly writing that Magi from the east came to Jerusalem. Magi from where? From the East. Probably Babylon or Persia, which is around where modern day Iraq is. They would not be particularly welcome in this setting. It probably wouldn't be that much different from modern-day Iraqis wandering around Jerusalem asking for directions to the local maternity hospital. It will raise suspicions. Matthew's point was pretty simple though: Don't get your theology about who's in and who's out too carefully figured out because God is famous for crossing barriers. God's love is not withheld from anyone in favor of anyone else. God's love respects none of *our* boundaries or borders.

Now here's the bad news and the good news about all of this –

The *bad* news is that there will be times when we have no clue as to how God is going to reveal something to us. Just when we think we have God figured out ... just when we think we know who God uses and who

God doesn't use to reveal God's message, the light goes on and we get surprised. God can be unpredictable that way which is terribly annoying because when it comes to understanding God, we don't like surprises. Especially when they challenge some of our assumptions about how things ought to be.

The *good* news is that God's desire to relate to us and to love us is bigger than we can imagine. We, as God's creation, are still loved passionately even when we get things embarrassingly wrong when it comes to our understanding of God and other people.

So again ... the good news *and* the bad news is that God is unpredictable. But we celebrate Epiphany in the church, because we recognize the importance of those times when that light goes off and we see God's love revealed. The truth that God's love respects no boundaries is revealed and that whoever you are, whatever you have done, wherever you come from, God loves you and longs to make that love known to you. May God's light shine on our paths this new year in ways that reveal God's love for all.