

Epiphany Sunday 2022
Sermon 1.9.22

Ephesians 3:1-12 This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—² for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you,³ and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words,⁴ a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ.⁵ In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit:⁶ that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.⁷ Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power.⁸ Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ,⁹ and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things;¹⁰ so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.¹¹ This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord,¹² in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:⁶ "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." "⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Magi begin their search in Jerusalem.

This makes sense. A new king has been born, a king to the Jews. It makes sense that he'd have been born in Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews but also a great city, a shining city, the envy of the world.

The Magi have come from the East.

This is vast and unspecific.

Tradition has filled in the blank, claiming they came from Arabia, Persia, India. There's a Mongolian tradition that takes these as theirs.

They have been imagined as kings, but that's likely to reconcile this storied event with the prophetic promise that one day all the kings of the world would come to the brightness of the Lord's dawn. We hear this promise voiced in Isaiah, in the Psalms, even in the Gospel of John, Jesus saying, "...salvation is from the Jews." Everyone will come.

They've been taken to be three, these Magi; but that's just because the gifts they brought were listed as three, as if they needed the number of people to correspond with what gifts they needed carrying.

That's a little goofy.

They've been translated as wise men—this perhaps to familiarize something that's otherwise strange. Magi isn't a category of people most Bible-readers know. Wise men, though? Maybe more so. *Maybe*.

I think their being strange is largely the point.

Magi were seen as magical, practitioners of magic, people whose power and knowing were mysterious to outsiders. It's spooky when how you know what you know isn't known. Pulled from the air. A dawning from on high. How they knew: it's likely they were astrologers, students of the stars. Their wisdom was somehow derived from that, astrology and astronomy not yet separate forms of knowing.

In any event, there was a luxury about them, this abundance of time and treasure poured out for a diplomatic journey. And this isn't even to speak of what gifts they brought, treasures really—gold (as fit for a king) and frankincense (as fit for a priest or for worshipping God) and myrrh (as fit for burial of a body, to embalm it). None fit for a new baby, just a baby in a house with its young mother and bewildered father.

But we're not there yet. We're in Jerusalem, where their search would start, as makes sense.

They would ask around. Maybe go to the Temple. I imagine this group majestic, a group greater than three, a resplendent caravan closer to thirty, or even three hundred, setting out from disparate homelands, meeting up on the way, with this as a plan as they closed in on the great city: "We'll figure it out when we get there. We'll ask around." As if they were college kids on a long weekend, for skiing, driving toward rumor of snow.

To Jerusalem, to the Temple, the seat of power: someone there would have some insight.

They asked around so much that word even reached Herod.

I wonder if they meant to have that happen.

I wonder what they knew about Herod.

If they knew much, they'd have wanted to keep word from him. But I think they didn't know much. Later, they'd be warned about him, warned in a dream. As of now, though, strange as their knowing was, this is something they were ignorant of.

Which only speaks to how provincial King Herod actually was. He'd like to have been a mover of worlds. He was more like a local despot. A brilliant political tactician, yes, he came more and more to love his power, became more and more demented by power, until he was an old man and whatever madness might have awaited him toward the end of his life was exacerbated by the apparent fact that he had no intention of surrendering his rule, not even to death—though this is what happens even to kings, of course. They die.

And thank God they do, because some are the kings who amass such power that the only thing ever to thwart them is their own mortality. The unavoidable fact of death: this is what comes as good news to the people who live under the rule of kings who only become more and more terrible while becoming more and more powerful: they will die.

Thank God.

In the meantime, though...

Herod had several of his own wives and sons killed, convinced as he became that each of these was about to kill him. In fact, it's said the Emperor Augustus, under whom Herod was the King of Judea, once quipped that it was better to be Herod's pig than his son. It was a play on words, the Latin word for pig resembling the Latin word for son. It's also not necessarily saying much. Herod, as a Jew, had little reason to slaughter a pig. But, still, the joke withstands, has gone down in history.

Herod, of course, according to the story, had many other people's sons killed as well. The so-called Slaughter of the Innocents: with this, Herod the King, in his raging, charged he hath that day his men of might in his own sight all young children to slay. All the boys under the age of two slain in his territory because the Magi asking around is something Herod *did* come to hear. A new king had been born, king of the Jews, which begs the question, what of this, their old king? What of Herod? He'd killed for less.

He sent for the scribes, the chief priests. They would know. They would know what the Magi had figured in gross terms but not in fine ones—exactly where? *Exactly where?*

And it would indeed take scribes, even the chief priests, to know the finer points of scripture as to where the Messiah was to be born: Bethlehem. It wasn't Jerusalem. It was Bethlehem, which really was almost nowhere, almost nothing.

I remember once at divinity school, going to tea at Rev. Gomes' house. Here, at his weekly afternoon tea, gadflies and hangers-on would congregate, eager to drink from ancient Ivy League teacups while chatting with their fellows in tweed.

I went for the free food and to play along. I'd known a few tweed-wearers in my time.

An older man approached me once, and we exchanged pleasantries. He asked where I was from, and ("New Hampshire") he nearly had a stroke when I told him. How had I ended up at *Harvard* from *New Hampshire*? (I didn't tell him my usual caveat: "It's the divinity school. It's different. Not everybody applies to the divinity school.") And how had the Messiah ended up born, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem? You can practically *smell* the livestock at the mention of its name. No wonder the Magi didn't think of it.

But now they knew, learned from Herod at what I imagine was his most obsequious. "Go, pay him homage, and then come to me to tell me where you found him so I can pay him homage too."

They would depart Jerusalem, head out, head down, down the social strata, down from glory to humility, down, down...

Were they surprised by this? Were they distressed by this? Like really, pit-in-your-stomach-distressed by this?

There's a story by the great Isaac Bashevis Singer. "The Lecture" focuses on a professor in mid-century New York, a specialist in Yiddish. He's been hired to give a lecture to a Jewish community group in Montreal, an optimistic talk on the bright future of the Yiddish language. He himself is a Polish Jew who emigrated to America to escape the Nazis, and he's made a good life for himself. A professor!

He's to take the train to Montreal.

On the way, the train encounters a snowstorm, and it slows the journey to a crawl. The train loses power, eventually heat.

In the cold and dark, the professor painfully regresses, goes from being a confident professor and optimist about Yiddish and the future of his embattled but still admirable sub-culture, to being a cold, worried, old man, to being terrified, tormented, filled with embarrassed, humiliated dread. What hope was there *actually* for Yiddish? What hope was there for the Jews,

brought low once again, stripped, shaved? The Nazi trains in Poland: they're as deep in his bones as the cold and dark have by now settled. He's all but back there.

When he arrives in Montreal, he's hours late. Only two people await him, a mother and daughter, poor and huddled on the platform, themselves once refugees of the Nazis. By now, the whole topic of his talk seems absurd on its face. How can you argue a bright future for something when so much of it has been lost, utterly mortified on its way out?

I've always imagined the Magi as unaffected by their journey from Temple to humble house in search of the new king, from shining city to backwater Bethlehem. Truth be told, I've always imagined it with some feeling of vindication. Since I am from a small town (small town *New Hampshire!*) and will likely live my life in one small town or another, I love the idea of the great metropolis coming to recognize its own falling short when compared to earthy Bethlehem.

Yes, it's true: your pastor is just that petty.

But even when I'm not at my resentful worst, I've always at least imagined the Magi as bemused by how wrong they'd gotten it, how off the mark their assumptions had been as to where kings might come from. Smacking their foreheads, feeling themselves a little foolish, entering the house, turning to one another, "Of course! Little Bethlehem! And isn't it quaint, now that we're here, now that we can really see it for ourselves? And won't this make a wonderful sentimental scene for Christmas cards two millennia from now?"

I wonder if it was more complicated than that.

I wonder if there was some worry about how exactly this could be the hope of the world, some distress about what shape the world must be in if this was its glory...?

A grand journey ahead, requiring their most resplendent dress and extravagant gifts, ending here in this house with a man, a girl, a baby, and little else.

This is the best the Lord can do?

Merry Christmas. Sorry I didn't get you anything.

Were the Magi embarrassed? Were they a little angry—this important mission, this important world-political event that required diplomacy and a bringing out of their best? They'd come all this way—Persia, India, Mongolia.

If so, how long did it take them to get it? How long before they could fully set aside their expectations, fully put to rest their anticipation of being impressive and being impressed. How long before they could enter this moment of intimate humility, in all its embarrassed immediacy, even embodied shame?

How long until they could even further worship?

Worship will often require things to mystify, to evoke a certain mood, a certain willingness of spirit. Awesome architecture, fancy robes, smells and bells, a sacrificial meal, even the drama of sacrifice itself—an animal on the altar, which at least isn't a human on the altar, though there has been that. Perhaps for even among some of these Magi there has been that.

At its best it is itself a sort of worship. It's safe to say Bach was at worship when composing his awesome Mass in B Minor. It's safe to say stonemasons who spent their lives on Chartres Cathedral felt themselves, from time to time, in moving around rocks worshipping God. At its worst its simple manipulation, even coercion. Remember that fire at that megachurch a few months ago? The fog machine caused it. Twitter responded, or at least *my* Twitter did: "Churches have fog machines?"

How long before the Magi could fully enter the moment, so painfully, immediately, embarrassingly real? How long?

"Oh my God, this is it. This is all there is."

"Oh my God, this is it. This is *all* there is."

From, "it's not enough," to, "it is *everything*."

Vulnerable love. Humble love. Soft bodies in need of care, and powerful to offer mutual care. This will save the world. And it is all.

It is *all*.

Thanks be to God.