

Epiphany of Our Lord Sunday Jan. 3, 2016 at Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Good morning and Happy New Year to you all! I'm so glad to be here with you today, thank you to Pastor Jason for sharing the pulpit on this Epiphany of our Lord Sunday. Now, for me, living with my spouse who's has been really excited over Star Wars: The Force Awakens since it came out, it's hard not to think about this epic War in the Stars when I think of Epiphany.

As we heard in the reading from Matthew, a majestic star guides the magi to the place where Mary and the baby Jesus are staying. There seems to be light and dark forces at play in this cosmic story. The dark, the plot of King Herod to kill the little King of the Jews, and the light of the magi journeying to show their devotion to this small Savior of all nations-against all odds.

For fear of stretching this parallel too thin I will move away from analogies to Star Wars. Instead, what does it mean to have an epiphany? According to most bible commentaries Epiphany means the "manifestation of our Lord." God sent God's son to be born a human being. Previously in the Old Testament, God was present with the people in many different forms: pillars of fire, or clouds, or a burning bush or a rainbow, but now, now it's different. God came to *us*, put on *our* flesh in Jesus-so God could be close to us, to feel what we feel, to journey alongside us as in the road to Emmaus, to be Emmanuel-God with us.¹

Reading through this story in Matthew, I cannot help but ask questions of it. Why was Herod so scared of this baby? What threat could this baby possibly pose to the all-powerful King Herod? One scholar laid it out by saying that Herod is not completely Jewish in his heritage-he is actually Idumean, from an area south of Judea and therefore an outsider in the land he governs.²

As a result, he is paranoid of anyone who questions his validity or methods. When the magi come inquiring about the baby who was born "King of the Jews," Herod sees this baby who will be king of *Herod's* people as the ultimate rival. So why would the rest of Jerusalem be afraid of this perceived competitor to Herod? My hunch is that they were used to life as Herod dictated it. Everything they knew, good or bad, was about to change; they were not ready for a new king with new rules and ideas--- plus prophecies are

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2736

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2736

mysterious, unpredictable and come in packages we are not expecting—a baby for instance.

This story of Jesus' birth and the magi following the star to Bethlehem may be so familiar to us that we don't stop to think about how strange the narrative actually is: there's fear and joy, gifts and secrecy, scheming and a star with a mind of its own, mystery and prophetic dreams. All of it seems too grandiose or tall tale-ish to be true. But the strange thing is, it's truer than true. It's not only a real story, the plot and characters are actually metaphorical as well. They represent a larger picture in the understanding of the whole book of Matthew.

Mark Allen Powell, New Testament scholar points out an interesting layer to the story, one that some may not have realized before: The truth is not reserved for wise people in Matthew, the truth is revealed through unexpected people and places; the truth is revealed to infants and those that approach God with a childlike sense of awe and wonder.³

Calling the magi "wise men" is misleading; they are surely intellectual scholars of their time but they are outside the fold of the faith and exhibit characteristics more in line with a servant rather than learned kings. "The magi in Matthew 2 are depicted as persons who do as they are instructed, who seek no honor for themselves, and who gladly humble themselves, kneeling even before a woman and a child."⁴

So what does it all mean? Is this simply a really complicated and epic baby shower? Why the expensive and fairly impractical gifts? I saw a cartoon on Facebook the other day with a caption that said "After the 3 wise men had left, the three wiser women arrived with fresh diapers, casseroles for the week and plenty of baby formula."⁵ Why not bring the ancient version of these gifts? Nevertheless, over the years the gifts of the magi have been analyzed by scholars saying the gold was a gift fit for a king, the frankincense as a perfume or incense offered to a deity and the myrrh, typically used at burials, is a foreshadowing of Jesus' death. There is significance in their gifts but they are still puzzling to the particularly practical folk.

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=5

⁴ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=5

⁵ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/exploringourmatrix/2015/12/three-wiser-women.html>

Consider: Your congregation has been working throughout advent and Christmas to provide practical gifts and necessary tools for families that have come to this country as refugees. The advent tree in the back of the church may seem strange since it had pictures of toilet bowl cleaners and laundry hampers and brooms and dustpans hung as ornaments on it—but those are gifts that can be used right away that provide a sense of dignity and cleanliness to people who may have lacked those precious presents on their journey. You are providing a piece of home and belonging for those who feel like foreigners in a strange new land. And today, we will give thanks for those gifts later in the service.

We will also see the magi bringing gifts to the front of the church—a reenactment of the journey they made to the Christ child and a reminder that we can come to Christ in reverence and awe at any time—whether we feel we have something to give or not, Jesus welcomes us. Similarly, I can only imagine how Mary felt with the magi offering expensive gifts at her baby's feet; she may have felt humbled and indebted to the magi for giving Jesus something she may never be able to give him.

Isn't that what we feel like sometimes? That we have nothing to offer, that our lives are out of our own control; we create hamster wheels in our minds and in our lives that keep us running on this negative loop taunting us in our heads saying, "I don't have anything to offer" or "I'll never be as successful or important as that guy or girl in my office that seems to have it all together."

I imagine some of you have children or grandchildren or nieces or nephews that you want to give the world to—you worked hard to give these little ones all that you could for Christmas and some of them chuck the expensive toy to play in the box it came in, right?!

I talked with my sister who has twins boys, almost three years old and she told me, "don't worry about getting them anything fancy—they're happy to spend time with you—you could wrap a sock and they would love it!" I ended up wrapping a bunch of Trader Joe's snacks and they were ecstatic. But it also wasn't about the gifts; it was about giving them attention, sharing the joy of the moment with them.

When I think of the gifts of the magi it makes me think as Mary may have; I will never be able to give *anyone* I love a pile of gold or other precious gifts

like frankincense; I feel like the little drummer boy from the popular Christmas song ⁶—what could *I* possibly have to give that would matter to Jesus? What can we bring to the manger that's of worth to our Lord and Savior?

In this season after Christmas, New Year's resolutions abound and with them all the pressures to be better, do more, to lose weight or gain money or prestige or to provide all the treasures your children's' heart's desire-- Sometimes the New Year sneaks up on us, pushing us to look at ourselves and what we've accomplished or what we've lost over the year. It can be exhausting and challenging to meet all of our own expectations and others expectations for us at this time of year as well as squeeze in a little time for ourselves before returning to work, or school or finding work after the new year.

I find it comforting to hear God calling to us from Matthew's gospel—YOU are enough! You are a child of God and you are loved. The promise of God's grace in the midst of all the commercial Christmas let down is this: you are enough. All those thoughts and feelings you're having that tell you you're not enough; that you're weak or powerless in your life—Jesus came as a weak and powerless child (in a time when children were not valued as much as they are today.) He felt both acceptance and rejection in his life and continues to show us that power is made perfect in those moments of weakness; that light and dark and joy and sorrow are inextricably connected.

In the echo of Paul's letter to the Ephesians and the footsteps of the magi from the East, we learn that this miracle baby did not come just for those of Jewish descent but also for all people, near and far. The magi come to Jesus from a foreign land because they recognize the gift that has been given to them. They respond by opening their hearts and their treasure chests and paying him homage, or, rather, worshipping him.⁷ This physical act of humility and generosity shows us how we are to respond to God's gift of unconditional love when it shows up in our midst.

This Epiphany-the manifestation of Jesus- God with us, comes especially for those that have been oppressed, possessed or feel like they are a mess. God

⁶ http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/c/christmas_songs/little_drummer_boy.html

⁷ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=5

reaches into those lives, our lives, in perfect vulnerable love to show us, it doesn't matter what you have or don't have to offer—it matters that YOU are a gift to God *from God* and YOU can be a gift to one another; you are precious in God's sight and you are loved. Amen.