

Epiphany of Our Lord Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Quick poll: Who here likes surprises? Well, I suppose it depends on what kind of surprise, right? Receiving a gift you didn't expect *can* be a pleasant surprise! Running into an ex- that you didn't expect to see is often an awkward surprise. That advertisement that automatically begins playing on a webpage is simply an annoying surprise.

Oh, surprises, you come out of the blue and hijack our attention – what are we to do with you?

Well, psychologists say, that once we're surprised we typically respond in one of three ways: 1) with a fight, as we try to beat the surprise into submission through control or planning, 2) with flight, as we hide inside our comfort zones, or 3) with flexibility, by staying curious and moving with, instead of against, the surprise.¹

In today's gospel, we see these reactions to surprise come alive. King Herod looked at the surprising arrival of the magi and immediately began fighting. He used the knowledge of the scriptures, the observation of the magi, and his military power to attempt to kill the child called "king of the Jews." For Herod surprises threatened his power.

Now, I don't have a military, but I do have this tendency to fight surprises – many of us do. Our society makes it easy to respond to surprise with flight and fight. We can Google away surprises like the weather, a restaurant menu, details about our co-worker, or even our next vacation spot. We strip away the surprise, and then we wonder why life feels so... blah. When we do it, we *think* it's for our own benefit. We tell ourselves that this world is full of enough surprises

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-author-speaks/201503/surprise>

as technology speeds along, threats to our values and security take center stage, and the possibilities of what we can do, see, and be are seemingly endless. So, we master the skill of avoiding change, we thwart risk, and we work to control everything so much so that when we look into the mirror we see Herod gazing back.

Yet, today's story doesn't end with a domineering King who fears the surprise. There is hope in the magi's approach. These men and women journeyed into the surprise; these numerous dreamers wondered; these people who were astrologists leaned into something new and uncharted. As these magi rode up to the "king of the Jews," we saw God's universal message. As theologian David Lose put it, the arrival of those wondering astrologers signaled that the reach of God's embrace was broadening considerably, that there was no longer "insider" and "outsider," instead all were included in God's plan for salvation. All the distinctions between people of different ethnicities and religions dissolved, and, now, no one knows what might change next.²

These magi riding up to the holy family might not seem like a big deal to us. We've heard the story year after year in church, and, frankly, it's not all that surprising anymore. Thomas Long reminds us that, while many religious leaders of the time knew that Isaiah announced that "all the nations" would come to the Lord's mountain, few, if any, "imagined that they would arrive with horoscopes, fragrant aromatics, and nature religion."³ After all, the Hebrew Bible strongly condemns astrology.⁴ So, it is a complete surprise to find *these* people - these foreigners, these gentiles, these outsiders, these condemned astrologers – riding toward Bethlehem.

If we stop to think about it though, it all fits with Matthew's theology. In Matthew's Gospel, we find that God honored all the old commandments and promises, but fulfilled them in

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1509>

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-12/sunday-january-4-2014-epiphany-lord>

⁴ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/12/the-child-king-messiah-shepherd-child.html>

unimaginable ways. After all, Long says, Matthew's gospel began by inserting five women's names into a typical male-centric genealogy. Matthew is an evangelist who knew that "God does not write in straight lines, but fulfills every prophecy with a surprise."⁵

Today, in Wicker Park, God's surprise challenges us. I wonder: are we looking for our God of surprises or are we stuck in the "same old"? Are we supporting status quo or are we looking at the world with wonder? If we got rid of our need for control and comfort, might we be surprised to find our God. Perhaps we may be surprised to see the gifts our gay, lesbian, transgendered, and queer siblings bring to the church. Maybe if we take seriously that these non-Jewish outsiders could point to Christ, then I wonder if we could begin to see Christ's image in Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu believers. If we acknowledge the gifts from these border-crossing magi likely allowed the holy family to financially afford to flee from Herod's soldiers, then perhaps we would seek to give thanks for the many contributions of border-crossers in this country. Maybe, just maybe if we upheld the truth that these dark-skinned magi were so loved by our God that they too were surprised with a warning in a dream, then maybe we too could protect our siblings of color.

You see, the message of Epiphany is one of surprises. Epiphany brings to light the manifestations of God in astonishing people and places. Our God is full of surprises. Perhaps our baptismal vocation calls us into surprisology – that's right, to study God's surprises. As we gather here each week following Epiphany we will read from Matthew most week. As we read ahead in Matthew, we will become surprisologists. We'll learn that when we want to exclude, our God includes. When we want to say "not yet," our God says, "get on with it already." When we say, "we aren't enough," our God says, "you, my child, are love." Matthew will teach us that our God reveals Godself in surprising and unexpected ways.

⁵ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-12/sunday-january-4-2014-epiphany-lord>

In a few short moments, we'll hear Mikka talk to us about the work of ELCA World Hunger. I imagine that we will be surprised at the expansive reach of the church through our gifts. I wonder in what ways that our Advent and Christmas Project gifts will be the surprising presence of Christ in the world.

Well, there it is. Our God is found in surprising places and people. I pray we might embrace the flexibility of the magi and look to be surprised by our God. I hope we can be challenged to live in God's surprises. For in that faith practice, we may be surprised to find God leading us, like that star, to abundant life. Amen.