

Epiphany
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
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January 6th, 2019

There is one thing that I have never understood about today's gospel story. That is, how did Herod and his advisors miss the star? If it was something so visible and unique that the Magi set out on a journey, why didn't Herod's people see it? Living in Chicago, I know that I frequently miss the happenings in the sky. If it's not light pollution or the weather blocking my view, then it's because I don't think it has an impact on my life. Yet, the Magi were different; they had an eye to the sky.

We don't know much about the Magi. We do know they were a group of people that traveled to see Jesus from the East with three gifts. They came, they spoke to Herod, they saw Jesus, and they left. End of Matthew's story. But, if we unpack the Greek origins of the word "magi," which is sometimes translated "wise men," we discover a bit more about these people.

You see, the term "Magi" is the name for priests among the Persians and Babylonians. These travelers were likely Zoroastrian priests who were skilled in interpreting dreams and astrology. Zoroastrianism is often referred to as the oldest monotheistic religion in the world. It was the dominate, state religion in the middle east for more than a millennium before Islam took its place. Their primary prophet is

Zoroaster who was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. (That sounds familiar.) Zoroaster began his ministry at 30-years-old after being tempted. Again, familiar. Unlike Jesus, Zoroaster predicted that “other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets.” The Zoroastrian priests believed that they could foretell these births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of a Savior.¹ So, it’s not out of the ordinary for these priests to be gazing at the sky looking for a celestial sign.

So, when they saw the sign, which was probably a planet and not a star,² the Magi traveled with gifts. It’s important to know that the magi were scholars with close relationships with the leaders of Persia. For, at that time, the Romans controlled Jerusalem and Bethlehem and, for decades, they had a series of conflicts with the Persian empires. So, picture this scene: religious leaders connected with the nearby rulers, who have been at war with Rome for over sixty years, showed up to publicly honor a new king. The Magi quickly discovered that it was not a child born to the current ruler. But the foreign priests were not going to head home with their gifts they needed to see the *new* king, even if he was illegitimate. Herod found out that the Magi were in town, and Herod was not a happy camper. But, instead of killing the Magi who were attempting to support and acknowledge an illegitimate ruler, Herod decided to head off the problem, literally, by killing the child. So, he secretly summoned them to find out the location. At that point, the Magi came to discover Herod’s plan. Since

there were no drones to strike Bethlehem or telecommunication to get information to local leaders, the Magi had a leg up and literally got out in front of Herod's plot.

Now, if I lost you, let me recap. The Magi were educated, foreign, astrologists and religious leaders with political ties from an enemy territory who came to illegally influence another country's leadership. They weren't from Russia, instead they were dark-skinned people from present-day countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and India. They delegitimized the current leader to his face, and then, rode on to Bethlehem as informants and financial-backers to help the Holy Family escape. Then, because we know "snitches get stitches," the wise Magi took a different route home.

That is today's story. It sounds more like something in my television queue than a good, wholesome Biblical story. But, that's the thing about the unfolding story of the Gospel message. While you and I want God to play by our rules and expectations, that's not how God works. For, our God does not care what the current ruler calls "legal;" our God does not play partisan politics; our God is not interested in playing by our status quo.

In the weeks ahead, we will come to better experience our God who shatters our expectations. For our God reverses the world's value system by rejected a mindset built on revenge and substitutes it with forgiveness and peacemaking; our God rejects a scarcity mentality that hordes our time and money for a rainy day and reminds us that these things are God's gifts to be shared; and our God rejects the fear-filled

leadership that drove Herod to slaughter innocent children and replaces it with servant leadership and loving sacrifice.

You see, it's unexpected that the Magi, these foreign religious leaders, would be some of the first to recognize the presence of God. And, it's odd that the devoted, Jewish writer of the gospel of Matthew would tell the story of these foreign religious leaders who saved the Christ child. So, could it be that the religious labels we want to ascribe to people don't really matter to our God? Could it be that God's presence is constantly around us glimmering something to be seen? Well, I dare to believe that, if we recognize it or not, there is constantly and consistently a glimmer of God's presence among us, like a star. Whether you or I accept or recognize its presence, it's there. And, in the weeks ahead, we will discover that the Holy Spirit is alive in each of us so that we, like the Magi, might notice God's glimmer and partner with our God in something wondrous.

For me, that was the story of 2018. As water flooded our basement, glimpses of God's presence came through the gifts of the many whose lives had been touched by decades of our ministries. When it seemed like dirty energy was the story of our future, a glimmer of God's presence came as we partnered to install solar panels. And, when it appeared like God's voice had been drowned by the worries and troubles of our city, that's when a glimmer of God's presence shone bright.

Friends, there it is. Today is about shattering the ideas we have about God's action. God is discoverable around us in glimpses, like a star, and in bodies, like a

baby. As we move through our service, today, we will discover where to look to glimpse God's presence – in our homes, when we care for the marginalized, and as we gather together at this table. For today we celebrate God's presence glimpsed in a star and fully embodied in Jesus, the magi, and one another. What a gift. Amen.