

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today, we celebrate the Epiphany of Our Lord— that is, the manifestation or revelation of God’s presence. Before “January 6” became a part of our country’s vernacular, Epiphany has been celebrated on that date for almost 2,000 years. At the Epiphany, we celebrate the revelation of God in human form as honored by the magi, or wise men. While popular culture shows the magi coming to honor baby Jesus at the same time as the shepherds, in reality, Jesus was not a newborn and the shepherds had already gone back to their fields and flocks.

What is most striking about these magi is their knowledge of the sky and larger cosmos. Perhaps it’s because I don’t often see the stars living in a city. So, any time I’m someplace where I can see them, it’s a memorable event. It’s the experience of seeing tiny stars covering the entire sky with larger planets dotting the landscape and the moon often dominating the sky. Pair that with the images released by NASA from the space telescope which reveal the complexity, beauty, and expanse of our cosmos, and I cannot help but think that these magi were on to something. They noticed something larger than those of us consumed by city life and the political powers of the day.

No matter who, what, or how many of these magi there were, the text is clear that they had seen an astrological event, and they knew it had great significance. They were curious, inspired, and hopeful about the changing world and new occurrence. So, they journeyed to the logical place for a new Judean king, that is Jerusalem. There they discovered that the newly born king was not with the

reigning king. And, when they asked for directions from King Herod then things got dicey.

Now, there are some important things to know about Herod the Great. He had a reputation. He had commissioned many building projects including the renovation of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. He also had a complicated religious relationship because he both supported Judaism, being half Jewish himself, and built worship spaces for other religions. This spending spree communicated Herod's power and wealth, but it has been cited as a cause of the serious impoverishment of the people he ruled. So too, most historians argue that he was a bloodthirsty ruler and would commit any crime in pursuit of his unbounded ambition. So, even though there is no historical evidence of it, the Herod's decree that all children under age 2 in Bethlehem should be slaughtered, this order would be characteristic of his rule.

As a recap: we have the magi, who see something new and seek to further explore, support, and cherish a novel thing that will bring about justice and life; on the other hand, we have Herod who sought to destroy, deceive, and derail anything new that did not support *his* ambition and ideas. You see, from the beginning of Matthew's gospel, we see a variety of reactions to Christ's message. Today, we see that God's presence is for all people—not just the rich and powerful. We are shown that our God is without borders and that our God draws together diverse peoples of different cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. And, throughout Matthew's gospel, this important theological concept is explored as Jesus interacts with those with different physical and mental states, as Jesus engages with sell-outs to the Roman government and with Jewish nationalist, and as Jesus demonstrates the honor found in serving and that serving others often teaches us the most about

ourselves. What we discover is that God comes in unanticipated ways with unexpected messages to bring about God's vision of justice, love, and peace. And that message will cause a variety of responses throughout Matthew's gospel.

So, it's no wonder that we read of these two very different responses to the star and Jesus' birth. Having heard these two reactions, today's story invites us to consider our response. Will change and something new cause us to react like Herod? Will it cause us to lead with ego, pride, and destruction, or will something new bring us curiosity and hope? What will our reaction be to God's love, justice, and peace?

Today's story also helps us to imagine what abundant life really looks like. Today's final verse reminds us that the magi did not return to Herod as he demanded; rather, they taught us a lesson on ethics and morality. For, when those in power compel you to do something unethical or immoral, you disobey. Instead, you help the most vulnerable and you stand up for what is right. After all, I often wonder if the magi's gift of gold was utilized by the Holy Family to flee to Egypt and avoid Herod's destruction.

But, what I really wonder about is what all of this looks like for us today. Maybe it looks like the brave individuals who stood up to the most powerful person in the world and disobeyed his desire to overturn an election. Or maybe we are like the magi when we support the work of our ministry partners who welcome refugees fleeing political violence. Or maybe we're like the magi as we pursue upgrades to our building to widen the welcome for all God's children with gifts time and treasure. You see, a magi's response to God's incarnation could be endless.

And, there it is, today we are offered the opportunity to notice how God is revealed in ways that aren't that different from today's reading. And knowing that

God is already revealed, then we have an opportunity—an opportunity to turn from our own ego, fixed ideas, and selfishness and instead embrace the response of the magi—a response rooted in God’s justice, awe, and opportunity. May we be like the magi and share God’s love because we have first been love. Let it be so. Amen.