

January 5, 2020
Second Sunday of Christmas
The Epiphany of the Lord

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Jim Widboom

“They Saw the Child with Mary His Mother”

Matthew 2:1-12

The first to come seeking the Christ child in the gospel of Matthew are wisemen from the East.

Who were they? Were they really wise men. What race were they? Did they travel by camel? How many were there? Only three? The text doesn't say.

East with a capital “E” doesn't tell us much. Is there good evidence that we know what is meant when the text says, “...from the East”?

How odd that Matthew's gospel gives all his attention to these strangers when he tells the story of the birth of Christ.

We say they are Gentiles, astrologers, magi, maybe kings, perhaps from ancient Persia. No angel song to shepherds who run to the stable to see the child in Matthew, but these strangers.

And what is the epiphany, when the light goes on and we see something we hadn't seen?

Is the Epiphany that Israel's king, Israel's Messiah, came for Gentiles also?

Is the Epiphany the irony that Gentiles and a new star in the heavens, not Israel's own teachers and prophets, show that this child, born of Mary, is Israel's messiah?

Or is the Epiphany that Matthew is already anticipating the last words of the Lord at the end of his gospel, “All authority has been given to me, that he is king.”

When these strangers arrive, all of Jerusalem are frightened. Why? Why do astrologers from Persia talking about a star and a new king in Israel make them afraid.

Something was threatening the calm of Jerusalem. Were there more than three of these strangers from the east, maybe several, and so Jerusalem was afraid?

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So Herod asks the learned class in Jerusalem where the Messiah was to be born. The Messiah! Like an occupation of foreigners, many, many strangers, so different, saying the Messiah of Israel is born and these are the wrong people to tell us this—does this disturb the calm?

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I remember saying to my friend Dr. Werner Lemke, OT professor at Colgate for years, that the members of the Society for Biblical Literature should be our best witnesses to the Lordship of Jesus. The Epiphany is that Persians came and showed Israel its Messiah.

So Herod learns that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

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Now there is always someone who tries to interfere with the coming of God into the world. It's Herod the King, more irony. Tells the wise men in secret, it's Bethlehem, go and find this child and come back and tell me because I want to worship him. Secrecy may get in the way of God's epiphany. Nothing is kept in secret the gospel says, everything will be proclaimed from the housetop. What makes it an epiphany is that it is seen by everyone. No secret.

So the magicians from Persia head out to Bethlehem. And the star appears again and stops over the place where the child is.

The Persian star stops over the house where the child is. These strangers and their star have found for us and shown us the King.

This day is important because the witness of scripture is that we have found the one we are looking for, the Christ child, born of Mary. To know you have found the one you didn't even know you were looking for, is to become a believer. The epiphany of the Christ child calls us to believe that Christ is King. It is an invitation to faith.

In Matthew there is nothing about shepherds, a manger, the long travel of Mary and Joseph, or even the birth. The birth of Christ in Matthew is all about finding the one Israel and the whole world is looking for. Matthew invites his readers to come to the house where the child is, to honor him as Lord of heaven and earth, to worship him, to open our treasure chests and give him gifts, and to fall on our knees in homage. We are invited today to believe that the Christ child is the new-born king, whom we are called to worship, and we are invited to receive the joy such faith creates in us.