

Wise Men Visit Reveals God's Dream of Oneness

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish

Matthew 2:1-12

January 5-6, 2019

*Grace and peace to you from Christ, who is the fulfillment.
Who is the much anticipated, awaited, and anointed King of all people.
Who puts God's dream of oneness into action. Amen.*

Move 1: Luke v. Matthew account of Jesus' birth

Epiphany Weekend. The weekend we hear the old, old story of the wise men from the East traveling and finding the Christ child beneath the star. A story that many have merged together with Luke's Gospel account of the shepherds.

On Christmas Eve, we heard from the Gospel of Luke and the author Luke's account of Jesus' birth. Directly following Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, the angels visit the shepherds tending their flocks in the fields. And the angels share the good news that Jesus is born to them.

Interesting choice. Shepherds. Lowly, hands-dirty, feet-filthy shepherds are the first to visit Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. No mention of Mary or Joseph's parents or extended family being the first. It is shepherds.

We pause to recognize that this first visit by the shepherds is significant. It is a revelation about God's dream and about Christ's identity. About who Christ came into the world for.

And while many of our nativity sets at home do have shepherds, animals, angels, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus, we have been waiting for this weekend. We finally get to move our wise men with their shiny gifts to join the crew. The squad beside Jesus.

I love that we have that tradition here at St. Mark's. Many of you probably noticed that the wise men started at our front doors, and each week they have traveled closer and closer to the sanctuary, where they now sit paying respects to the Christ child.

We read in today's Scripture that this visit from the wise men most likely occurred many days following Christ's birth. This visit isn't included in John, Luke, or Mark's Gospel. Only in Matthew's.

In Matthew, there is no mention of shepherds. Just the wise men, Herod, the Jewish religious leaders, Mary, and the child.

While the shepherds and wise men didn't visit concurrently, this visit by the wise men is equally significant and telling. It equally reveals God's dream and Christ's purpose for the world God so loves.

The second visitors to Mary and the Christ child aren't family. They aren't some priests or Jewish leaders. They are outsiders from a faraway land. Who traveled miles and miles and miles. Risked everything. Not returning to Herod but going a different way. All in order to meet and encounter Christ. And pay homage to him.

This weekend, we unpack the meaning of this visit from these wise men and what their journey means for our faith today.

Move 2: Christmas program fail

But before we dive into the Epiphany narrative, I have to start out by sharing a story about one of the first Christmas programs I directed. One that is properly known in my household as the "2011 Christmas Program Fiasco."

While on vacation this past week, my family and I were reminiscing about where we've come from and how it landed us to where we are today. Through conversations, it was clear not only the miles and miles I've come as a father, husband, and man; I definitely have grown in my ability to serve the church.

I want to take you back to my first year in seminary. Now, during your first two years of seminary, you are encouraged to get your feet wet and volunteer at a local church. Smart to get a sense of what being a leader within a church setting is all about. Luckily, I acquired a job working as a youth worker at a church in North Minneapolis.

I was hired in the Fall of my first year, and my first big assignment was to plan the Christmas Program. I was fresh and new. I had all sorts of energy. We had a relatively large group of kids, and I wanted to make sure every child had a part.

That was my dream for my first child's Christmas program.

Now I, like you, knew that I shouldn't have the wise men visit during the Christmas program, but I ended up writing a section at the end of the program that included a brief cameo from three wise men in order to give three more parts to our young people.

All they had to say was, "We come traveling from the East." One would add, "I have come to bring you gold"; another, "I come to bring you myrrh"; and the third, "I come to bring you frankincense." Then together they'd say, "We will see all of you knuckleheads again at Epiphany."

I know ... I was a wordsmith back then. I could write curriculum for a living.

Well, when it came to assigning parts, I made the mistake of letting the kids choose their parts. Never will I do that again. No one wanted to be Mary and Joseph. Everyone wanted to be an animal who had no speaking parts.

So when I explained the role of the wise men and the gifts that they'd be offering, I was surprised when a hand shot up real quick. Jacob said he would love to be a wise man and didn't mind having a speaking part.

I was so proud. Jacob and I were gonna get along. He was a real go-getter.

Now, the other big mistake I made was that I didn't stress the importance of practicing beforehand. Due to busy schedules, Jacob didn't make any practices. But, I figured, he was jazzed to volunteer. He'd take it seriously.

Came down to the Christmas program and everything was going relatively smoothly. We were at the end. I was finally starting to breathe when I motioned for the wise men to start walking down the aisle for their lines.

And two of the three did as the script said, "We come traveling from the East." The first boy said, "I have come to bring you gold." The second boy said, "I have come to bring you myrrh."

And then it was Jacob's turn, and I will never forget it. He said, "And I have come to be Frankenstein." And he then proceeded to hold out his arms and grunt at Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus.

Palm to face. I kept trying to whisper to him to correct himself. "Frankincense," not "Frankenstein." To me it was a fiasco. But to the congregation, it was hysterical and brought tons of laughter and life.

As I reflect back, Jacob's creative and dreaming mind is why I love children's Christmas programs. They aren't perfect. They are messy. Organized chaos. They have an abruptness to them and parts that seem odd. Out of place. No matter if the kids practice or not. It just is.

And the truth is that outside the box, otherness, oddity encapsulates Jesus' birth narrative. And it sums up quite nicely the visit from the wise men in Scripture.

Move 3: Scripture

At first glance, this visit doesn't seem like such a big deal. Wise men follow a star, and the star stops over the house where Mary and the baby are staying. The wise men enter and hand over their gifts.

But the story has much more meaning. The visit has much more weight when we peel back the important layers of this story.

First, it's important that we note that these were not kings from the east. The Greek word translated as "men" is actually "magi." [1]

Magi were scholars of their day. These men were the rock stars of their day and very well respected. These gentlemen were astrologers, who were labeled wise because of their ability to make sense of the cosmos and interpret dreams.

Science wasn't what it is today. During that time, astrology was highly regarded as science. These men were scientists. [2]

Now, not only is it odd that this is who God had knock at Mary's door, these scientists weren't of the Jewish faith. They were Gentiles. Outsiders. Not church-going folk. Not tradition-holding folk. Not practicing monotheism.

Many scholars agree that these men were also most likely from Persia, which was known to have a longstanding rivalry with Rome. [3]

And they are the ones God chooses. Make no mistake: This is not an accidental visit. God visits these men in a dream and tells them not to go back the same way they came. Not to fall for the trap or deceptive lies that Herod is telling them.

God is heavily involved with orchestrating the whole interaction. From their initial take off from the East to their descent out of Bethlehem. All of it, God has a hand in.

This story. Of the wise men. Of their lengthy journey. Of their avoiding Herod to head back home a different way. This visit. Their arrival symbolizes that change has come. God is approaching. Newness is at our door step. [4]

The wise men's visit is perfectly told in a way to contrast Herod.

Herod's fear and plotting represent our want to protect and preserve the way things are. That thinking continues to lurk in our world, but God has other plans. God has other dreams that God is actively putting into action.

This Epiphany, we celebrate and proclaim that Christ will always overcome our need to keep the status quo. Christ's love, God's embrace—they're always broader, larger, more expansive. [5]

God will travel and risk everything. God will work in whatever means necessary. God will use and move through whomever it takes. In order to reach us. In order to seek after us. That's the good news we need to hear this weekend.

That's the good news of the Epiphany story: The movement. The incredible ways in which God will move. Valleys and mountains. if God has to. If it means having you experience Christ, God will do it.

That's the good news.

There is no longer good and bad, those who are in God's favor and those who are not. No one is outside God's embrace. There are no haves and have nots. There are no

insiders and outsiders. No Gentile or Jew. Poor or rich. Gay or straight. Citizen or illegal. Black, white, or brown. There is just one.

Oneness. That's God's dream for us. That's what God brings to life in Christ. That's what the visits from the wise men symbolize. Oneness. Connectedness.

To remind us that we belong to one another. There is no hierarchy. There's just a web of connected people—of us, God's beloved community.

Move 4: Link arms

To close, I want to illustrate this good news. In a world full of division, full of positing nasty comments on Facebook and Twitter, full of name calling ... we need the message from Epiphany. That we are one. That no one is outside the body of Christ. That we are together. Bound together by the love that is manifested in the person of Jesus.

To illustrate the movement both of God and of the wise men in Scripture, I'd like all of us to rise and hold out our arms out like Frankenstein. Now, with your Frankenstein flippers, link arms with your neighbors. What I want is for all of us to be connected as one giant web.

This is going to take some movement across the aisles. Please do so and make sure no one is outside the web.

Is everyone connected together?

Look around. This is God's dream for us. That we be one. One people.

You, my sisters and brothers, are God's beloved. You are and were always a part of God's dream. You are never outside of God's love. God will never stop going after you. God will risk it all. Travel miles and miles and miles, if it means you knowing that you belong.

Amen.

Resources

[1] Sarras, Niveen. "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12," workingpreacher.org, 1/4/2019.

[2] Satterlee, Craig. "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12," workingpreacher.org, 1/6/2013.

[3] Sarras. "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12."

[4] Lose, David. Dear WorkingPreacher. "The Adults-Only Nativity Story," workingpreacher.org, 1/6/2013.

[5] Satterlee. "Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12."

Reflection Questions

- Are you willing to dream? How are you living out your dreams in your life?
- What makes following Christ difficult?
- When has God nudged you to do something that fell outside your comfort zone?