

Matthew 2:1-12

Three wise men walk into a barn. Sounds like the start to a joke. But of course, it's not a joke; it is the Epiphany of our Lord to the Gentiles. Outside of the book of Revelation, few stories are more divorced from the actually biblical narrative than this one. No where is Scripture does it say that there were three kings, or that they were kings, or that they rode camels or were named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. They most definitely did not visit Jesus in the stable, at least according to the Bible, and it is interesting that Joseph isn't mentioned either. So pretty much all of our mental images of this event are off to some degree or another.

But it's not because the story is obscure; on the contrary, it is a story we tell so much that we can't help but embellish it, give it the meatiness it deserves but which the writer of Matthew did not provide. We want it all to fit on the Christmas card, in the Christmas pageant, have all the bits of the story together, shepherds and star; wise men and angels. But it's just not there in scripture.

What is there is a compelling story, though. Sorcerers from a foreign land come to Herod and ask to see the person born to replace him. No wonder all of Jerusalem was afraid. Herod was not one to suffer rivals. He had had members of his own family executed because he thought them rival to his throne. Now here are strangers asking to pay homage to the next king. Under the guise of helping the strangers find the new born king, but in reality wanting to find his rival and eliminate him, Herod has the scribes search the literature. "Look in Bethlehem," he is told. So off they go.

Herod wants to find the child to get rid of a rival. What do the magi seek? What causes them to leave their homes and undertake a journey into the unknown? A newborn king? Surely other princes must have been being born all the time. Yet foreign magi had never felt compelled to call on Herod before. What made this different? The star? But if that were unique, how did they know what it meant? Whatever it was, something brought them out of their lives into the presence of the Lord.

So what about us? What draws us to the presence of God? Oh sure, you get to hear a great sermon, but that can't be it. Habit plays a role. Perhaps even guilt. But at the root it needs to be a sense of awe and wonder at hat God has done. God's desire for us. The desire that we be part of the one body of our Lord Jesus Christ. To know that we do not lead lives of quiet desperation, but rather are fearfully and wonderfully made, created to love God and one another. Born to be part of a community of saints that stretches through eternity. Called to be part of something bigger than ourselves, older than ourselves, greater than ourselves, yet can be made part of our very being.

Because ultimately, this is not a story about wise men or kings or stars, but about the Son of God, the Messiah, proclaimed by the prophets, being born. The writer of Matthew pulls in bits from Micah, 2 Samuel, Numbers, 1 Kings, Isaiah 60, Psalms, and the infancy story of Moses from Exodus. Mathew's first Jewish readers could not fail to see the allusions. This is a story of the Epiphany to the Gentiles of the in-breaking of God into God's creation.

This is the story of the work of God being proclaimed in the heavens for all the world to see and marvel at. It is a call to be full of wonder, awe, gratitude, and joy. While the powers of this world respond in fear and subterfuge, the meek and lowly behold a wondrous site. While Herod trembles in fear lest someone usurp his earthly throne, the King of Kings freely offers to make us heirs of God's eternal kingdom. This is God's work, and it is marvelous in our sight.

St. Paul writes to the Ephesians that he prays that they may know what hope, riches, and greatness awaits them. And us. For we are inheritors of that same kingdom. In the same way that St. Paul encourages his first readers in Ephesus, we, too, may receive encouragement from his words. We, too, are entitled to receive "every spiritual blessing the heavenly places." We have only to claim them. They are freely offered.

But we resist; we wait; we are unsure. And why? Do we feel unworthy? Well, on our own we are. But through Christ we are made worthy to stand before God; not on our own merits, but through the love and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that is what calls us, summons us to his presence. The magi followed a star. We follow the risen Christ, who not only shows us the way but is the Way, the truth, and the Life.

The magi left the baby Jesus and returned to their own country. We need never leave our Lord. He has promised never to forsake us. The magi brought gifts to honor the Lord. What of our gifts do we offer him? Are we willing to use what God has given us to further God's kingdom? The magi left the comfort of the known to seek the unknown, believing it to be something worth the travel, the danger, the risk. What are we willing to risk for God? What are we willing to give up to follow him? We are promised the hope of greatness and wonder. Are we willing to step out in response to that call? May God grant us the grace to claim the blessings promised and to live into the life that God created us to live. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*