

“Interfaith Epiphanies”

A Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

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Our scripture reading comes to us this morning from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, verses 1-12. Hear now the Word of God:

Matthew 2:1-12

1In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

It always feels a bit awkward, reading these Christmas texts two Sundays now after Christmas. I mean, the stores are done with their after-Christmas sales, all the Christmas décor packed up and put away. By now, Christmas should be over. But in fact, it hasn't even been twelve days since Christmas. The song “twelve days of Christmas” emerged out of the tradition of celebrating for twelve days, beginning either on Christmas day or the day after, which means the twelfth day is either Jan. 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup>, depending on your tradition. The twelfth day is known as “Epiphany,” or the manifestation of God to the Gentiles, as expressed in the adoration of the Magi. We celebrate Epiphany on the Sunday between January 2 and 8, since most years Sunday does not fall exactly on January 6<sup>th</sup>.

So here we are, today, January 4<sup>th</sup>, celebrating Epiphany, which is why we read again the story that was part of the Lessons and Carols on Christmas Eve, the story enacted by the children in the pageant on Christmas Eve, the story we sang about in “We Three Kings” at the late communion service Christmas Eve. But that was 10 days ago, and so it sounds odd to be hearing it again so soon. The Magi seem wrapped up in the story of Jesus' birth, so why are we hearing about them again?

The Epiphany, or the manifestation of God to the Gentiles, is seen in these Magi, these Gentiles, who have come from far away to worship the newborn king. Jesus was sent as a Jew to be the Savior of the Jews, and yet even from the beginning, we see signs that God has a wider plan, encompassing more people as the people of God. We celebrate that Christ came not just to the Jews (as represented by Herod) but also to the Gentiles (the first of whom were these “Wise Men”).

But let me be clear: this is not an anti-Jewish text. It is a text that challenges those in power, the ones who ruled the land, such as Herod, who had the power, yet not the true wisdom to be able to worship the newborn king. And while Herod was a Jew, or at least a Jewish convert, he did not live like a devout Jew. And this text calls attention to the striking difference between the openness of these outsiders, these wise men from the east, and the murderous exclusivity of Herod. There could only be one King of the Jews, and that was Herod. All other pretenders had to be killed.

Herod was King of Judea, and as the King of the Jews, he was threatened when these wise men came looking for the child that was to be born King of the Jews. He wanted to stop this usurper, so he sent the wise men on to look for the child. Herod, by calling upon the chief priests and the scribes, found out that Bethlehem was where the child was to be born, so he gave them directions. But of course his motives were not to worship the child, but to have them find the child so he could then come and have the child killed.

But these magi, they are *wise* men for a reason. They are not so easily misled. As wise men, they were astrologers, followers of the stars. We do not know much about them, except that they came from the East, and that they are Gentiles. And that they brought gifts to the child born in Bethlehem. Gold, frankincense and myrrh, the kind of gifts only given to royalty. These wise men knew how to honor a king, and these wise men knew enough to honor the child that was declared by the stars, even if they found him lying in a manger, with no signs of royalty around him.

What boldness—to come and worship a child as King of the Jews, when these wise men were most likely not Jews themselves. They had no need to pay homage to a king of the Jews... Why show such lavish generosity? Why go out of your way to bring gifts to a child from a different cultural background as your own, bowing down to him in reverence? And after this encounter, these Magi go back, not to Herod, but to their home land, though they go by a different way.

I’ve heard pastors suggest that this text, when the Magi go a different way home, is about non-Christians converting to Christianity, that by the encounter with Jesus, the Magi or Wise Ones change their ways and their beliefs. That these wise men came from a different religious background, persons who followed the stars, but that their encounter with Jesus called them to change their lives, going back a different way because they were going home as different people.

But then I’ve wondered: why did they even go home at all? Why didn’t they leave everything, as Jesus called his disciples to do later on in his life, why didn’t they forsake their home so that they could learn from this child even as he grew into an adult? By all appearances, they seem to have come respectfully, paid homage to this child, given him gifts, then returned home to their culture and religion, continuing to follow the movement of the stars.

This text has made me think of the Christian faith in relationship to persons of other faiths, seeing in this text a moment of interreligious dialogue. If these Magi were not necessarily converted by their encounter with Jesus, if they didn't remain to follow him as his disciples, what would it mean if the Magi went back, and simply continued to live the lives they had lived prior to this encounter?

We encounter persons from other religions everyday in today's world. We no longer live separated by huge geographical regions that in many ways predetermined which religion and culture would be yours. Persons today living in the same house, belonging to the same family may adhere to separate religions! On a regular basis, we may be confronted with the question—what does it mean for my faith in Christ, if there are all of these other faithful adherents to other religions? Are these other religions just as valid as my own Christian faith? If so, does that mean that my faith is in vain? Meaningless? Not true?

Four summers ago, while I was living in Atlanta pursuing my PhD in religion at Emory, I had my own faith-testing experience of interreligious dialogue. I had been teaching preaching workshops for a group of Methodist lay ministers at Candler School of Theology, and the coordinator of that program had given my name out to someone looking for a homiletics instructor—someone who teaches preaching.

So I received this phone call from a man who was looking for a homiletics instructor. The message he left me was pretty vague, so I wasn't sure why he was contacting me separately from the program at Candler. When I returned his phone call, I learned that he was *Buddhist*, and he was looking for someone to help teach homiletics to a group of Buddhist dharma teachers—he and his colleagues in this particular sangha would meet on Sundays, and these meetings would include a talk on the dharma, or sacred teachings within Buddhism. These talks are very much like sermons, he explained, though these teachers have not had any formal training in preaching. Would I be able to help, he asked?

My initial reaction was one of anxiety and excitement—anxiety over how little I knew of Buddhism, and excitement for this interreligious interchange. How cool was it, that I was being asked to teach Buddhists how to preach! But once my excitement wore off, and the anxiety lessened, I began questioning what this meant for my faith. While I did know a fair bit about Buddhism and valued much of what it teaches, I began to wonder what it meant for me as a Christian to help them prepare better dharma talks.

I wondered what it meant that I would be teaching people who believe in a different religion, how to convey the beliefs of their religion more effectively? After all, my training was not in general communications, but rather I was studying to teach Christian preaching, a homiletician within the *Christian* tradition, preparing other Christians to communicate messages taken from the Bible about salvation in Jesus Christ. Would I be acting faithfully as a Christian and as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ to lead preaching workshops for a group of Buddhist teachers?

Then I had what could be named an “epiphany”—not the same thing as the revelation of God in Jesus Christ—but the everyday experiences we have of sensing God's presence, seeing something of God revealed to us from the world around us. That everyday epiphany was this: that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a religion—

it's a person. The Wise Men came from the east to bring gifts to a person—the king of the Jews—and not to convert to a particular set of beliefs. And as I encounter other religions, I can see them as Magi—Wise Ones, who come bearing gifts! We can picture ourselves with Mary, sitting quietly beside the baby Jesus, wondering in awe at the sight of these wise men bearing gifts, and we can be grateful for their gifts while remaining beside our Savior, Jesus Christ.

And this is because the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a religion—the good news of the gospel is Jesus Christ *himself*, a person. Jesus has made a difference in our lives, a personal difference, and it affects how we view the world and ourselves. Like Mary, we can lovingly remain beside Jesus, and witness the others who also acknowledge Jesus. We can remain beside Jesus while we encounter other religions as Wise Ones who come bearing gifts. And indeed, there are treasures untold in what others have to bring!

For there is much to learn from other religions. There are many gifts to be discovered as we encounter the beliefs of others, as we see and experience their way of living in the world. And they have much to teach us about ourselves! It is often in studying the religions of others that we come to believe in our own more fervently. We realize there are similarities as well as differences, and while we appreciate both we hold fast to our unique differences. The gifts of the Wise Men communicated something about who Jesus was, and the gifts of other religions continue to communicate something about who Jesus was and is, and yet it is in our personal experiences of knowing this Jesus that we cling to the uniqueness of this person as God in our midst, as Lord over our lives.

Back to the Buddhists, I did agree to work with them to facilitate preaching workshops, what we called “dharma teaching workshops.” But I joined them as a learner, as someone aware that treasures that can be found within the traditions of another. What gifts I had to bring, I could only offer. And in our time together, I hope I was able to help them share their treasures as a group and with others, as I have learned to share the treasure I have found. It was an interesting opportunity, and one that I felt I learned from as much as what I could have offered to them.

And this is an experience several of you in this congregation have shared with me—the kind of treasures you have found in the rich diversity of traditions that exist in your own family, with persons marrying into other religious traditions, children taking on different faiths or no faith. You've learned to celebrate different holidays and to recognize different milestones in the life of faith of your grandchildren. But you've seen them all as gifts.

It may feel lonely, at times, to stand beside the Christ child in the manger, when the Magi leave to return home, but the gifts don't stop there, because the gifts had been given to the true Gift, the greatest Gift the world has ever seen, the Gift of God-enfleshed, the gift that keeps on giving because God can never cease to give of God's self to us. And that gift cannot help but be given and shared with others. That is why we remain rooted in our faith, while continuing to see and receive the gifts that others bring from afar. Amen.