

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

What are we doing here? I mean, Epiphany; what is the point of celebrating it? For that matter, what is it? Well, we all know from the song that there are twelve days of Christmas. That gets us from December 25 to January 5, and the Feast Day of Epiphany always falls on the next day, January 6. 2019 is one of the rare years that January 6 falls on a Sunday. So if you are a liturgical nerd like me, this is kind of a big deal, because we usually have to move the celebration off of January 6 to the next Sunday in order to actually celebrate it. I did the calculations, and this Feast Day will fall on a Sunday only four more times in my whole career. Full disclosure: you just might hear me preach this sermon again on January 6, 2047.

Epiphany is about Matthew's story of the Magi's visit to young Jesus and his family. Although we as a culture will often lump that into the Nativity story at Christmas, that's not how the Bible tells the story nor how the Church celebrates the day. First of all, even though the American culture doesn't give a lot of weight to Epiphany, many other cultures do. For instance, many Christian cultures around the world don't give gifts on December 25. ("Blasphemy!") Instead they take their cue from the Magi and give their gifts on January 6.

So what is the point of celebrating the arrival of the Magi after the twelve days of Christmas? Well, the Nativity story is found in Luke, and it involves angels telling shepherds in the field where they can find the newborn Jesus. This Nativity story sets the stage for the rest of Luke's gospel, which is a declaration that Jesus is on the side

of the poor and downtrodden. The shepherds were exactly that in their society. The Epiphany story is different, though. It comes from Matthew's gospel, and it is solely about the visit of the Magi. Jesus is older in this story, possibly already a toddler.

So you might be wondering, "Why is Pastor Kris ruining the image of my most treasured Nativity set, which clearly comes with the shepherds and the wise men to place side by side?" I promise that ruining anything for you is not the end I am seeking. Rather, my point is that just as the Nativity story sets the stage in Luke's gospel for who Jesus is to the poor, so too does the Epiphany story set the stage in Matthew's gospel for who Jesus is to the world. It's therefore worthwhile to dig deeper into Matthew's story by itself.

The Epiphany story takes place in the second chapter of Matthew, and the first chapter is a great lead-in to it. Chapter One consists of only two things: the Jewish genealogy of Jesus, and the dream that Joseph had. Those might sound insignificant, but they are not. The genealogy is important because there are four women in it who were not Jewish. Since Matthew wrote his gospel for a mostly Jewish audience, his readers would have quickly picked up on the idea that the family of their Messiah was more diverse and colorful than they would care to admit. We should also note that the genealogy purposefully begins with Abraham, who is a key figure in understanding the role that Jesus fills in Matthew's gospel. Joseph's dream then wraps up the first chapter, and in the dream he is told that the child shall be named "Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." I'll come back to this later, but we should note for now that the child was not named Emmanuel, the child was named... Jesus. So Matthew will have to resolve this discrepancy somehow.

After that first chapter, we reach our lesson today: the visit of the Magi. The significance of this story today is what it reveals about salvation. Since Abraham, the Jewish people have known that they are God's chosen people, and yet God also promised that through Abraham's offspring all nations of peoples would be blessed. Since that promise, there has been a lingering question in ancient Israel; "Okay, we are the chosen nation. But how is it that we are going to be a blessing to the other nations of peoples?"

They were never able to settle on an answer to that question. What happens, rather, is that God provides an answer with the events of today... the Feast Day of Our Lord's Epiphany. On this day we learn that the Jewish Messiah is given to Israel as this young child, and he will be the fulfillment of Israel; it is through him that all nations shall be blessed. That is the significance of the visit of the Magi. The other nations -- represented by these Magi -- are finally united with the one who is the fulfillment of Israel. As Sister Kathleen Cannon describes it, "[The Feast Day of Epiphany] is a celebration of the unfathomable gift of [a young Messiah]," and it is a celebration "of the new possibilities that exist for the human race because of this gift of God to us."

With this Epiphany story, God is ushering in a new inclusive reality, a dawn of new light for all the world. This new light is why it is called Epiphany. Everyone is welcomed now, and Epiphany is a wake up call to God's radical welcome. It stands to reason that if the Messiah is open to receiving the offerings that other nations bring to him, then the Epiphany story should be heard as a challenge to Christians to be open toward outsiders who approach their congregation.

A case in point is a congregation in Denver. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber years ago started a Lutheran congregation there. This congregation from the get-go sought to embody God's radical grace and acceptance. They intentionally sought out those who often don't feel welcomed in most congregations. Like Pastor Nadia, some of the congregation's first disciples had bodies that were fully adorned with tattoos. Some of the people had histories of addiction. Some who came were no longer welcomed in their home congregations because of their sexual orientation or because of their gender identity. Some who came were leather-clad and drove motorcycles. Some who came slept on the streets every night. What brought them together as a congregation was more than just an invitation to visit; it was the genuine welcome they each received.

However, the congregation's message of bold acceptance of people from all walks of life began to appeal to others... like people who showed up to worship, but -- instead of sporting tattoos and leather -- these outsiders wore neckties or dresses. Some of the congregation's first disciples didn't want to welcome this new crowd, because the new crowd unintentionally represented the people in the past who had shunned, abandoned, or abused the members of the congregation. "Do we want 'these types' hanging out in our congregation?" they would ask. So Pastor Nadia had the unique task of shepherding the members her congregation into a deeper look of God's radical welcome. Soon they realized that there indeed is a place in their congregation for misfits who wear neckties and dresses. Indeed, there is a place in their congregation for any outsider to come, to be fully welcomed as they are, and to worship a gracious God who welcomes, blesses, and receives people from all walks of life.

So the Feast Day of Epiphany dares congregations to ask, “Are we satisfied with a blanket invitation to outsiders, or -- like our Messiah -- are we going to be truly welcoming of them and hospitable toward whatever gifts they bring with them?” I hope we can seriously grapple with that question. Because Epiphany begs us to consider how open we are to receiving the gifts that others might bring.

For ages, whenever representatives of two cultures have come together, it has been the practice that gifts are exchanged. It is seen as an essential part of building diplomatic relations between peoples. The gifts that the Magi bring to the young Messiah symbolize the forging of the new relationship between God and all the people of the world. We find here, at the start of the gospel the gifts shared with the Messiah. But we should ask, “Where is the reciprocal gift in return?” We have to wait for it... and wait for it... because the reciprocal gift finally occurs at the end of Matthew’s gospel. Jesus in the Great Commission sends his disciples out to all nations to share the gifts of his ministry with them. That is a fascinating way to view the gifts of the Magi; they are the first of the bookends in Matthew’s gospel for God establishing a relationship with all the nations of peoples. But let’s look a little deeper at what Jesus says at the close of the gospel. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The End. But did you catch it? Jesus here resolves another question that has been lingering since chapter 1. Joseph’s dream told us that the Messiah would be called Emmanuel... “God is with us.” For twenty-eight chapters, we’ve been pondering why Jesus is not named Emmanuel. “When will he claim that name?” Well,

in the final verse of Matthew's gospel, we finally receive that answer: "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Jesus is God, present with us always, to the end of the age. Emmanuel. Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all nations of peoples will be blessed through his offspring. I don't come from Jewish lineage, so the Feast Day of Epiphany is something that I -- and probably you -- should truly celebrate. Because in the Epiphany story, we witness that a new dawn has arrived; the light of God's favor is now shining on all the nations of the world.

May we uphold this good news that has been revealed at the Epiphany of our Lord. May we celebrate God's work of forging a relationship with all the nations of peoples in the world. And may the grace that we have received move us to radically welcome all outsiders who come into our midst to offer their worship to the Lord.

Amen.