

EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD | JANUARY 6, 2024

EPHESIANS 3:1-12 | MATTHEW 2:1-12

There are parts of the Christmas story that are such a large part of our culture that we can forget they're not in the actual stories from the gospels. Things like Mary riding a donkey. The idea that Mary and Joseph were trying to stay in an inn. I'll even admit that when I was planning one of our Christmas Eve services, I planned on having the kids put the farm animals in the nativity when they're mentioned in the story. But they're never mentioned. Most of these don't really detract from the meaning of the story.

The story of the Epiphany, the visitation of the magi, has some of these, too. We often call the magi Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. We assume there were three magi because they had three gifts. I like to imagine that if there were four magi, one of them would have showed up empty-handed and said, "These are from all of us." None of these really add to or take away from Matthew's story.

But there are some other non-biblical traditions that get at some very important ideas. If you look at late medieval art depicting the visitation of the magi, you'll see three figures. One of those figures will often be a young person, one will be middle aged, and one will be elderly. So the magi represent people of all ages. And one will usually be from East Asia, one from Africa, and one from Europe.¹ For the people who painted these works, that represented the entire world as they knew it.

None of that is in St. Matthew's story itself. But it gets at the heart of what Matthew is trying to communicate with this story. That the Christ child is of importance to everyone on earth. No matter your age. No matter where you're from. Jesus is here for you.

This is not something that would have been obvious to Mary and Joseph or Matthew's first readers, for that matter. Some of you may know how Matthew's gospel starts. "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham." And then another sixteen verses listing all the generations. is not something that we read in church. I think you would find it kind of boring to listen to. And I have no idea how to write a homily on it.

But it sets up Jesus's story in a very particular way. Matthew introduces Jesus through the context of Jewish history. The big markers are not Pharoah and Caesar. They are Abraham, David, and the exile. This is a Jewish story. And Matthew seems to be telling us that Jesus is here to redeem and renew and restore. The assumption is that Jesus is here to do that for Jews.

So imagine that you're Mary and Joseph. You're in the guest room after Mary has given birth to Jesus. You've just welcomed this child who you believe will accomplish great things for your people. And then these guys show up. And they're not from Bethlehem. They're not Jews. They're not people that you know. They're definitely not people that you invited.

¹ Shania Johnson, "Exploring Representations of the Black Magus in European Art," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 3, 2024, <https://www.metmuseum.org/perspectives/articles/2021/5/exploring-black-magus-in-european-art>.

And you wonder if that's when the lightbulb goes off in Mary and Joseph's heads. See, there's really two epiphanies happening in the Epiphany story. One is the capital-e Epiphany when God reveals the Christ child to the magi. But there's also a lowercase-e epiphany happening here, too. This one for Mary and Joseph and for Matthew's readers who are realizing that this story is much larger than they thought it was.

God has been talking to people we don't know. Jesus is here for other people, too. Mary and Joseph weren't wrong about what was going to happen. But the story was bigger than they realized. Jesus is here for Jews. And for a bunch of other people, too.

This is the same thing St. Paul reflects on in today's epistle reading. Paul is a committed, devout Jew who comes to faith in Jesus. That, on its own, isn't that unusual. The rest of Jesus's disciples were basically the same. What made Paul unusual was that he recognized that Jesus wasn't just for Jews like him. But he was someone of universal importance. Jesus was here for Jews and non-Jews alike.

This is how Paul describes it in today's reading. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

Paul's whole ministry is animated by an epiphany kind of like the one Mary and Joseph had. His story about God wasn't wrong. But it was bigger than he thought it was. And what made Paul's ministry so important is that when the unexpected people showed up, he would have said *This isn't about you. Or This isn't for you.* But instead, Paul thought *I guess God's dream is bigger than my imagination. And I guess God's redemption is bigger than my agenda.*

How does Paul describe it in today's reading? "The wisdom of God in its rich variety." That rich variety includes people like Mary and Joseph as well as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. It includes people like St. Paul as well as all of the seemingly random people who accepted his message. And it includes people like you and like me, all the people that we know and love, the people we dislike and can't stand, and all the people we never think about at all.

In their unexpected arrival, we have an epiphany of our own. Nothing other than the rich variety of God's story and the unending love of God for all creation.

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