

You're the Gift

Matthew 2:1-12

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Remember. No priest or ruler from Israel came to worship Emmanuel born in the manger of Bethlehem. The official historians did not record his birth. Not one of the good and holy people of Jerusalem traveled the few miles to worship the birth of the Son of God.

Only outsiders went.

Only some foreign astrologers bothered to worship.

Only the Magi brought gifts to the new born king.

We commonly refer to our scripture lesson this morning as the story of the "Three Wise Men". They are the ones we sing about in our hymn, "We Three Kings of Orient Are".

The Greek term for "the three wise men" is "Magi". The Magi were philosophers and leaders of various religious sects throughout the Ancient Near East. For five centuries they had been known as teachers, scholars, users of supernatural powers, fortune tellers, astrologers and "magicians"; "magi" making the root of that word.

Tradition calls them "kings" not scripture.

We assume there were three of them because of the three gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. But scripture doesn't put their number at three.

From what we can learn of their history, the magi were no heroes.

The Magi had a sleazy reputation. They'd set up shop in a marketplace and use their religious hocus-pocus for personal gain, hoodwinking people out of their money.

Few Magi were honored or respected. Most made their living taking advantage of innocent and naïve people looking for spiritual answers, such as the card or crystal ball readers we still see on the edge of town, or the professional astrologers you can call over the phone who will be glad to talk to you as long as you give them your credit card number.

All the more amazing then that Magi should be the ones to come and worship the new born king of Israel in the manger of Bethlehem.

Who were these particular Magi? We are not given their names but latter tradition will make some up for them. We can deduce that they were probably Babylonian or Persian astrologers which means they traveled a thousand miles to Bethlehem following the star in the east.

Consider such a journey back then. No freeways, no restaurants or motels. No Starbucks or 7-11! Illness, hunger and bandits commonplace. Magi may have traveled in large groups for safety and here we assume that only three made it.

They were pagans, outsiders, foreigners considered untouchable by pious Hebrews. Yet their sole purpose was to worship the Messiah of Israel.

Now why would they bother to do that? The risk, effort and cost were extraordinary for anyone let alone those with a reputation as religious con men.

Immediately upon arrival in Israel they get involved in the dangerous politics of the mad king Herod. He could have easily cut their throats.

There was no reward, no glory in such a journey. In fact, for those used to making off with other people's money, these Magi give away their treasures to a baby.

Somehow they knew the world would never be the same because of the Christ child. All that was important was to worship the new born king.

Tradition has it that they arrived 12 days after the birth of Jesus. So we mark the beginning of the church's Epiphany season on January 6th. "Epiphany" means "to manifest or appear openly". During the 4-8 weeks of Epiphany season we as a church focus on the "manifestation" of God in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

And that life begins in Bethlehem.

The manifestation of God as the Christ child stirred a capital city, threatened a reigning tyrant and attracted foreigners to come at great cost to worship a baby and give their riches away to him.

What do we do with the news?

Some of us grumble and moan about getting out of bed on a Sunday morning to drag ourselves and the kids off to church.

Are outsiders welcomed here?

We expect God to dispense blessing to us for being good people who come to church, to take away our pain in life as if our worship were magic.

But please remember something very important in our text this morning. The pious, powerful and good citizens of Jerusalem wouldn't travel the few miles to worship the Son of God in Bethlehem.

Only outsiders went.

Only some foreign astrologers bothered to worship.

Only the Magi brought gifts to the new born king.

This morning we have the opportunity to receive Holy Communion.

It is not offered to us because we are good, righteous and correct people.

It is not offered because we've made the sacrifice to leave the comfort of our homes and come to church.

It is offered because God is so completely love that God would give all of that love to us, even those who don't deserve it, in the life and death of Jesus.

One of the messages of Epiphany is that even the stranger; the ones who we don't count are included in the salvation of God. Another message is that the object of the giving...gold, frankincense and myrrh...is not nearly as important as the giver.

Social status, outward piety, nationality and gender are not restrictions to those who will risk everything to do bold things in faith. If the Magi are the first to worship the newborn king of Israel than even the likes of you and me are qualified to follow Jesus and make a difference in the world.

Years later the apostle Paul will write that "we are the hands and feet of Christ" (I Corinthians 12:12-f). In the end, what God is seeking in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a transformed world, through transformed lives. Two thousand years later, we're still the best gift God has to offer, let's live like it. Amen.