

### *A Message We Keep Ignoring*

<sup>CEB</sup> **Ephesians 3:6-8** <sup>6</sup> This plan is that the Gentiles would be coheirs and parts of the same body, and that they would share with the Jews in the promises of God in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>7</sup> I became a servant of the gospel because of the grace that God showed me through the exercise of his power. <sup>8</sup> God gave his grace to me, the least of all God's people, to preach the good news about the immeasurable riches of Christ to the Gentiles.

<sup>CEB</sup> **Matthew 2:1-12** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. <sup>4</sup> He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: <sup>6</sup> You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." <sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. <sup>11</sup> They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

### *A Message We Keep Ignoring*

In two days, the traditional celebration of the Epiphany takes place. Epiphany means "appearing" or "appearance." In the Western church it refers to the star in the east that led the Magi to the Christ child. Sometimes we overlook the fact that the Magi were the first gentiles, the first people other than Jews, to recognize that this child was different and worthy of awe and worship. Celebration of this event goes back in time to even before the church started celebrating Christmas.

We often seem to focus on the star. It's fascinating miracle. Some try to figure out if there is some unusual celestial explanation, a super nova or some other extraordinary astronomical event. Some people have a hard time believing that this star really existed. After all, how could a star come to rest over a location as specific as a house or a stable? Others have suggested that the star was really a glowing angel. Some are afraid that if they don't believe in the star, then they can't believe in Jesus. And so we can get bogged down, we can get lost in the miracle, and never look past it to what lessons this story has for us.

In the adult class this morning we explored some interesting and challenging lessons from this text. I hope you were there to consider those thoughts. Now, we will examine another facet of this story.

It seems that it's universally common for people to be concerned about their position in their culture. No one wants to be at the bottom of the heap. As affluent as we are, with our cars and air conditioning and phones and TVs and computers, we're still quick to point out that we aren't rich - because there are others who have much more than us. Even among the disadvantaged, there's a pecking order. Some cultures have very

defined strata with everyone glad that they aren't in a lower class. Even among slaves, there's a hierarchy. Wherever we find ourselves, we're likely to define ourselves as better than someone else. It is as if **we** can't have any worth unless there is someone who is worth **less**.

As Americans, we generally think ourselves more fortunate than others, even though there are other countries that have better educational systems and a population that is healthier. People who live in California, Texas, New York, Florida, and, dare I say, North Carolina, often feel that their state and culture is much better than others. Why, I've even seen this sort of attitude between Thomasville and Lexington!

Someone once commented, "How odd of God, to choose the Jews!" and we are inclined to agree with that statement. God could have picked a people who were more numerous, more powerful, more important, at least in ways that impress us. But on the other hand, the Apostle Peter was shocked to learn that a gentile, and a Roman army officer, at that, was acceptable to God. Paul was educated at the feet of Gamaliel in the strictest and most conventional Jewish wisdom. What a change and shock for him it was realize that the Gentiles were part of the covenant with God. The message of inclusion is often the least welcome word.

The gospel of Matthew is written for a Jewish readership. In the eyes of that audience, the Magi are a scandal! They were astrologers, stargazers, magicians – they would have been called quacks and charlatans. So, it's a scandal that foreign astrologers mingled with God's anointed one. It's almost certain that they weren't royalty. Singing about "we three kings" is completely a matter of using poetic license to dress them up for polite society. Making the leap from three gifts to three gift givers involves a huge assumption. The names Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltasar come from the eighth century. Over the centuries we have cleaned up the Magi and made them respectable – by changing who they were.

The Magi were astute enough to interpret the star as a sign of a new Lord born in Judea. But, despite Herod's famous disposition for paranoia and killing various family members, they were the bumbler who tipped off Herod, resulting in the slaughter of the innocents. On the other hand, when they got to Bethlehem and met a family that was only slightly above the status of slaves, they didn't say, "Excuse us, we have the wrong house." They didn't decide that they'd misinterpreted the star somehow. No, they presented their expensive gifts to the child of a peasant family.

The involvement of pagan magicians and astrologers show how far grace reaches. And it's a preview of Jesus' later association with Samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers. Jesus didn't let his own importance become self-importance and blind him to the needs of others.

Today, we use the word "epiphany" to mean a moment of increased insight, a moment of revelation, an "ah-ha" moment. That isn't that far from the original meaning of "appearance" as we use it to indicate the appearance of increased understanding. Sometimes, epiphany happens when we learn something that we knew, but have forgotten, or should have known, but have overlooked. You see, as scandalized as Jews were by the Magi, as surprised as Peter and Paul were by the welcome of gentiles into the church, it shouldn't have surprised them.

God has always loved and cared for all of us. God declared that we were "very good," a wonderful creation. There was no creation of first and second class humanity.

Psalm 145:8-9 states that God's "compassion is over all that he has made." <sup>9</sup> The LORD is good to **everyone** and everything; God's compassion extends, to all his handiwork!" In Genesis 12:3 and 18:18, Abraham is told that **all** people will be blessed through him and his descendants. That commission to Abraham's descendants is reaffirmed in Isaiah 42:6, "I, the LORD, have called you for a good reason. I will grasp your hand and guard you, and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations."

When Cyrus the Great of Persia allowed the Jews who had been in Babylonian captivity to return to their homeland, many of them were discouraged by the shambles they saw on their return. But not only were they encouraged to rebuild their nation, but through Isaiah, God challenged them to reach out beyond their own clan. "It is not enough, since you are my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel. I also appoint you as light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isa 49:6 CEB)

The whole book of Jonah is about God's concern for those whose are not Jews. This is also plainly stated in Isaiah where we read that, "Israel will be the third along with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing at the center of the world. <sup>25</sup> The LORD of heavenly forces will pronounce this blessing: Bless Egypt my people, and Assyria my handiwork, and Israel my inheritance." (Isa 19:24-25 CEB)

Sisters and brothers, we do not need to think ourselves better than others in order for God to love us intensely. But over and over through the centuries we have forgotten that and have thought ourselves better than others and more chosen by God. We have ignored God's clear declarations to the contrary. We have failed to see that message reaffirmed by the Magi by letting ourselves get lost in the star, instead. We have forgotten the Old Testament injunctions to care for the stranger and treat them equally to ourselves. We tend to be proud of being better than someone else, at least in our own judgment, and are like the Pharisee praying in the temple. In Luke 18:11 – 14, remember Jesus saying, "<sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself with these words, 'God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else--crooks, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I receive.' <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector stood at a distance. He wouldn't even lift his eyes to look toward heaven. Rather, he struck his chest and said, 'God, show mercy to me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> I tell you, this person went down to his home justified rather than the Pharisee. All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up." (CEB)

The Puritan minister John Robinson said 400 years ago, "God has yet more light and truth to break forth out of his holy Word." Sometimes that light and truth break forth from scripture when we read and study with fresh eyes, finding truth that we have been overlooking. Then we can see the message that we have been ignoring, that those we think unworthy may indeed have wisdom to impart if we stop dividing people into various levels and placing ourselves above others. Amen.

Live in thanks.  
Go with courage and with certainty.  
You cannot out-give God – but you can try!