

Sermon

Christmas II January 5, 2025

Matthew 2:1-12

Merry Christmas! And welcome to the 12th Day of Christmas. Today is the day of 12 drummers drumming and 12th Night Parties – which, by the way, is tonight at 5:00 with a potluck dinner followed by a gift exchange/thievery event. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Epiphany.

On Christmas we commemorate the birth of Jesus to Mary, a Jewish mother, and Joseph his Jewish guardian, in the Jewish town of Bethlehem. His birth was announced to a group of Jewish shepherds by angels.

On Epiphany we commemorate the arrival of the wise men. Scripture tells us that these people were from outside the Jewish community and territory – “from the East.” We have extrapolated that it took up to two years for them to arrive in Bethlehem based on Herod’s order to kill all male children two-years old and under. Tradition tells us that they were astrologers (early astronomers) who studied the night sky. Later they were called kings and given names: Melchior, king of Persia; Gaspar, king of India; and Balthazar, king of Arabia.

As pious traditions evolved, the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were also given additional spiritual and theological meaning: gold for the King of kings; frankincense for the Lord of lords; and myrrh to symbolize both Jesus’ anointing as high priest and in anticipation of his death, as when Nicodemus bought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to prepare the body for burial.

While these traditions and spiritual/theological embellishments may enhance the story for us, they can cloud what is actually there in Scripture: Joseph is absent; Mary is silent; Jesus does nothing extraordinary for a 2-year old (no speaking in tongues or other miraculous signs). The star, the gentile strangers, and even Herod are the main characters in the story.

The star is a miracle drawing outsiders into the faith and the embrace of Christ. The star has been explained as a visible comet or as the conjunction of certain planets or group of stars. But using science to explain miracles is just as futile as using miracles to explain scientific events – such as creation.

The wise men from the East, those Gentile strangers, are those seeking something deeper and more meaningful than the life they currently know. They are outsiders who do not know the story of the faith. They are outsiders who won't come to the faith by proofs or creeds. But they are outsiders whose search allows them to reflect on miraculous happenings.

Herod is also a player in this story. And while all kinds of things have been attributed to him – the personification of Satan the deceiver, a power-driven maniac who only uses religion as a prop to curry favor, or as the connection to the Pharaoh who ordered the deaths of newborn Hebrew boys, he also represents the status quo of the faith. He represents those who fight change and work to keep things the same as they ever were.

All this – the star, the wise men, Herod – brings me to this question: “Why do we study Scripture?” Isn't one of the reasons we study Scripture, both in various groups and as we use it in worship, to gain insights on how to live in a right relationship with God?

If that's the case, then we must believe that the words of Scripture have the power to address our lives and our current circumstances. And if they can do that for us, then they have that same power to address the lives of other people – past, present, and future. So then Scripture is not simply a collection of ancient stories but the living word of God, active and sharp, judging our thoughts and intentions and instructing us throughout our lives.

So what can Matthew's story of a star, wise men, and Herod tell us today?

First, keep your eyes open for miraculous stars. The existence of God cannot be scientifically proven. Science has explored the vastness of space, delved into the depths of the atom, and looked back to within about 20 minutes of the Big Bang. Science is very good at telling us the *HOW*, but it is completely useless in answering *WHY*. That's where faith comes in.

Faith tells me God created. It tells me God became man. It speaks of angels and miracles, of love and sacrifice, of bread and wine become body and blood, and of stars that led foreigners to a house in Bethlehem. What miracles will you see if you are willing to look for them?

Second, the wise men represent all those people not of our faith but who have felt or experienced something that caused them to search. A vision, a miracle, a coincidence, a well-timed conversation, or whatever, may have given them the impetus to ask questions or begin their own journey of faith. It may be that the light which shines from this place will lead them here. It may be that their journey will lead them to bring their own valuable gifts to lay before the Lord. It may be that you are the star leading someone on a journey of faith.

Finally there is Herod. And while we aren't despotic rulers who terrorize and kill anyone who gets in our way, there is something of which we need to be aware:

After Jesus was born, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" When King Herod heard this, he was frightened . . .

As I said earlier, Herod represents the status quo of the faith. We could easily become Herod. When people from the outside, strangers, come into our presence telling us of their faith journey and what brought them to us, we need to work at not being frightened. We need to work at not killing their excitement or inquisitiveness. Instead of being frightened by their presence and that they might change the status quo, we need to work at welcoming them, including them, learning from them, and helping them grow.

As we move forward this year, keep in mind these three things:

1. Actively look for miracles and signs from God;
2. Be willing to shine the light of God so that it leads people here, be the star;
3. Do not be afraid of strangers coming into our midst; do not become Herod.

Today is the 12th Day of Christmas. Tomorrow is the Feast of the Epiphany. In these two events, Christmas and Epiphany, God is doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?

Be not afraid.

Amen.