

Message: Epiphany

A defendant isn't happy with how things are going in court, so he gives the judge a hard time.

Judge: “Where do you work?”
Defendant: “Here and there.”
Judge: “What do you do for a living?”
Defendant: “This and that.”
Judge: “Take him away.”
Defendant: “Wait! When will I get out?”
Judge: “Sooner or later.”¹

We've arrived! Weeks ago we saw the spark of light, now we see the Light with greater intensity. The Light is so bright that it humbles us. We've been given directions by prophets from ancient days. Now we're shown the way by magi, coming from other parts of the world. We've used the map of prophecy to discover the time, place and person we're looking for, where X marks the spot. We've found a way to enjoy life on the way. Best of all, we found the treasure. We found – a baby?

Wait a minute! That can't be right. The Messiah is supposed to come riding on a war horse, ready to do battle with those who oppress us. The Messiah will rally the angel armies to overthrow those would put us in chains, cast out the wicked and all of that. Right?

Why is everyone so excited about a baby? Let me tell you. Jesus' birth is the moment in history when life changed. It's a moment that started a movement. We've part of the movement today. In the name of Jesus, wonderful things have been done. Hospitals, colleges, homes for those who have no place to be, and much more have been created to honor Jesus.

Sadly, very bad things happened as well. Children were killed, crusades were misguided wars, the Spanish inquisition darkened the world and there were mass suicides. Today, we're struggling with clergy abuse scandals in the Catholic Church and other denominations.

¹ Pate Ferry, <https://www.rd.com/joke/145166/>

People use the Bible to justify oppressive and unjust policies and actions, locally and nationally.

The good and bad actions aren’t new. They follow a pattern we see demonstrated in Matthew’s narrative (Ch. 2). First we see the example of Herod the Great. Herod was appointed to serve as a king over Israel by the Romans. Herod wasn’t even Jewish. He’s an Idumean, which means he’s from Edom, from the region south of Judah. Today it would be in the country of Jordan. Herod was made king through politics. He’s been ruling for almost 40 years, so he’s an old man.

Matthew tells us that magi came from the east after Jesus was born (Matthew 2:1). They came looking for a newborn king, one who would inherit and rule. So they went to Jerusalem first, to the palace. It makes sense. The new king would be born to the ruling king and queen.

Matthew tells us Herod was troubled (v4). The Greek word means agitated, disturbed or upset. And, with this king, anything that worried him worried the people – they didn’t know how Herod would respond. Herod was known for ruling with an iron fist. Herod wants to keep everything for himself. He’ll sacrifice anything and anyone to do so.

The second example is found in the description of Jesus. Matthew makes it clear: Jesus is the fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy. Jesus is a new kind of ruler. Jesus is described as a shepherd, one who will lead and care for the people. Jesus later described himself with these words, *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep”* (John 10:11). And Jesus also said, *“I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness”* (John 12:46). Jesus is the antithesis of Herod. He leads with love and kindness. Jesus is willing to sacrifice himself for the benefit of others.

The contrast can’t be more stark. While he had the right to be so, Jesus wasn’t born to be an earthly king. He’s our spiritual ruler, the king of heaven, the king of kings. Jesus shows us a new way to live. He leads us to full, healthy lives, to lives filled with passion, peace and purpose.

Which of these rulers appeals to you? Jesus, hands down!

That leads to the second question Matthew asks:

How will you respond to Jesus, the king of kings? The baby.

Matthew gives us two demonstrations. The first is Herod. Herod lies to the magi. His concern is self-serving. Herod puts his interests first. His treachery leads to the murder of innocent children in Bethlehem by his order. He wants all the attention and power for himself.

The contrasting example is the magi or wise ones.

We know little about them. We don't know how many there were, their gender, age or nationality. Coming from the east means they're gentiles. The word magi has a Persian root, so they're most likely astrologers or those who interpret dreams. They're most likely counselors to royalty, as they were well funded and brought gifts worthy of a king.

The magi didn't have any malicious intent. They're foreigners, yet they're seeking the child to worship him. That means they're literally going to go on their hands and knees and bow down before a child, most likely kissing his hand or foot. They do (v9). It's a humbling position. They're willing to place themselves below the child. He's special. This baby is worth their adoration.

Humble adoration – that's the way. Our posture should mirror theirs. We, too, are gentiles. We're those from other lands assembled to hear good news about what God has done. God sent the Messiah, the Savior, to pardon our sins and heal all of creation. We need Jesus to lead us and care for us, because he can do what we can't. Bowing before Jesus is the least we can do.

Is Jesus worthy of your worship? Jim Harns is part of our Wednesday morning Bible study. He has a great illustration of the nature of God.

Are you familiar with the mathematical concept of pi (π)?

It's defined as the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter. Pi is a constant. Can you recite any of it? 3.14159 is as far as most of us get. Pi is a transcendental number. The exact value of π can't be calculated. Pi is very useful to us. It's applied in physics, engineering, math and computer science. The symbol for pi indicates a physical constant that is, at the same time, beyond our ability to compute or rationalize.

π is like Jesus. He is transcendent God in physical form. John says it well, *“the Word became flesh and lived among us”* (John 1:14). Jesus is simultaneously a human being and holy God in a mysterious and wondrous way. Jesus is both a real person and the divine, transcendent God. God rose up from within the child, revealing more and more of the special nature and character of the divine glory through the presence of Jesus and his life.

Jesus is worthy of our humble adoration, worship and praise.

How will you respond? We can go our own way. We just want Jesus to go away so we can resume our regular programming. Jesus is a great teacher. I can give an hour for the right kind of spiritual entertainment every so often. Otherwise, I’ll do what I want – don’t bug me! You know how that goes. I do. Sadly, I left the church for 25 years. It took a major life crisis to bring me back. You don’t have to wait!

Let’s publically show special honor and respect to our Savior.

That means we acknowledge, worship, admire and lift him up in what we think, say and do. We make the effort to be in the presence of God, no matter what it takes. We seek his presence with humility. We don’t come empty-handed. We offer what we have to give freely, willingly and gratefully. We know we can follow the star to the destination and God will reveal the treasures of heaven to us.

It’s your choice. What happens next?

The Holy Spirit may be moving in your lives in different ways.

For some of us, Epiphany is part of our spiritual journey leading us to know Jesus. For others, it’s a divine signpost that points us to where God wants us to go. For some, Epiphany is a message about stewardship, a focus on our time, talent and treasures. For others, it’s about knowing when to start a new adventure in faith, and when to stop.

The magi show us the way. Matthew 1:9 says, *“they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising until it stopped over the place where the child was.”* Where are those places where Jesus is that we must stop? Under the bridges where the homeless live? At a hospice where someone’s facing the very last hours of life?

Among the abused or with those who are in prison? On the streets, demanding justice for the dreamers or the children who’ve been separated from their parents? At every opportunity where people are longing for the light of Christ, the Christ of Epiphany is already there.

One aspect that I find most amazing is to consider the way grace is moving. We follow the star in different ways. God is working in our lives before we even realize it – that’s God’s grace leading us. Maybe God wants us to take a new direction in our lives – that’s God’s grace prompting us. Or God is helping us to recognize, realize or judge well. That’s God’s grace making us better. What decision, new project, new relationship or adjustment do you need to follow through on this year that will ultimately bring honor to Jesus?

I invite you to be part of the movement. God is with us. Open your heart to Jesus and welcome him with humility and devotion.

Let us pray ...

O God, you are so mysterious! Forgive us when we struggle to understand how you can be the founder, the primary mover, the very Creator of all that was, is and will be. And yet you came to us in the most humble, vulnerable of ways, as a child born in a distant land to parents who had no idea who you were. Thank you for revealing your glory Lord. Thank you for the blessing of the wise ones who showed us that our journey through life has meaning and purpose when we seek you. Lead us on a path that will make our relationship with you deeper, stronger and more loving as we enter this new year. We pray this in name of precious, loving Jesus. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6 (CEB)

Arise! Shine! Your light has come;
the LORD’s glory has shone upon you.

Though darkness covers the earth
and gloom the nations,
the LORD will shine upon you;
God’s glory will appear over you.

Nations will come to your light
and kings to your dawning radiance.

Lift up your eyes and look all around:
they are all gathered; they have come to you.

Your sons will come from far away,
and your daughters on caregivers’ hips.

Then you will see and be radiant;
your heart will tremble and open wide,
because the sea’s abundance will be turned over to you;
the nations’ wealth will come to you.

Countless camels will cover your land,
young camels from Midian and Ephah.

They will all come from Sheba,
carrying gold and incense,
proclaiming the LORD’s praises.

Matthew 2:1-12 (CEB)

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. 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.”

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*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.”*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. 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.” 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. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. 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. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.