

Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-23

Sermon

Hobart, January 11th, 2015

Devonport, January 17th, 2015

Launceston, January 18th, 2015

Matthew 2:1-23

2 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men* from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, 2 “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose,* and we have come to worship him.”

3 King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. 4 He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote:

6 ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities* of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’* ”

7 Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. 8 Then he told them, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!”

9 After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! 11 They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.¹

* Or *royal astrologers*; Greek reads *magi*; also in 2:7, 16.

* Or *star in the east*.

* Greek *the rulers*.

* Mic 5:2; 2 Sam 5:2.

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mt 2:1-23). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

INTRODUCTION:

I. EPIPHANY

A. THIS TIME OF THE YEAR IS KNOWN IN THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR AS "EPIPHANY"

1. The specific day is January 6th, but the season goes from then for four Sundays into the beginning of February.
2. It follows Christmas, continuing the story of Jesus.
3. It is one of those seasons most know least about.
 - a) And yet it is a season with a simple and yet profound scriptural message behind it
4. Today we are going to look at the visit of the Magi and learn more about Epiphany and its importance to our Christian life

B. PRAYER

BODY:

A. EPIPHANY FOCUSES ON THE MANIFESTATION, THE APPEARANCE, THE COMING OF CHRIST TO THE WORLD;²

1. According to Laurence Stookey its central focus is the identity of Jesus.

The coming of the Magi and the Baptism of Jesus help us to identify who it was that is born in Bethlehem and thus enable us to get past “the cute baby” approach that so vitiates the deep meaning of the incarnation and prevents us from appreciating the great exchange of divinity and humanity.³

B. “EPIPHANY”: DEFINITION

1. Worldbook; 1. an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity. 2. (Figurative.) a. a sudden revelation or perception; an insight into the essence of a thing.

C. COMES FROM A NT GREEK WORD; *erchomai*:

1. Bauer: Freq. the coming has rather the sense *appear, make an appearance, come before the public.* .. Of the appearance of Jesus among men ⁴
2. go... go with (lit. ‘after’) someone ⁵

² *Epiphany*, or the manifestation of Christ to the world (January 6), a Christian observance originally commemorating Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:9) and his changing water into wine at Cana (John 2:1-11). Later, the visit of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12) from Christmas was added. (Achtmeier, Paul J., Th.D., Harper’s Bible Dictionary, San Francisco: Harper and Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985.)

³ Stookey

⁴ Bauer, Walter, Gingrich, F. Wilbur, and Danker, Frederick W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press) 1979.

⁵ Bauer

II. MATTHEW 2:1-23

2 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men* from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking,

2 "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose,* and we have come to worship him."

A. THE WISE MEN; "MAGI";

1. William Loader

These mysterious figures from the east reflect the aspirations of Israel that one day the wise and the powerful would come to Zion to acknowledge Yahweh. These are variations on the theme of the Gentiles sharing in the blessings of Israel. They foreshadow the expansion of the mission from Israel to the Gentiles, to be announced in Matthew 28:18-20.

In some sense...the magi are representative of all of us who are non Jews. It is the generous stream of a tradition of hope rooted in the prophets.

The message of the story can hardly be missed: the best of the world's wisdom acknowledges the Christ. The tradition connects also to those passages of the generous prophetic stream which speak of the nations coming together in peace, to beat their swords into ploughs and their spears into pruning hooks and to share in a great feast and learn the law of God.⁶

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

B. HEROD

1. Reigned from 37 to 4 BC

Herod was of Nabatean and Edomite descent, whose ancestors converted to Judaism. Herod was ashamed of his origins and he attempted to invent Jewish genealogy for himself. Herod was born around 74 BCE in Idumea, south of Judea.

* Or *royal astrologers*; Greek reads *magi*; also in 2:7, 16.

* Or *star in the east*.

⁶ William Loader, *First Thoughts on Gospel Passages from the Lectionary, Epiphany*, <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtEpiphany.htm>

Herod ...also known as Herod the Great and Herod I, was a Roman client king of Judea. ... He has been described as "a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis", "the evil genius of the Judean nation", "prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition" and "the greatest builder in Jewish history".

He is known for his colossal building projects throughout Judea, including his expansion of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (Herod's Temple)

Upon Herod's death, the Romans divided his kingdom among three of his sons.⁷

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote:

⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,
are not least among the ruling cities* of Judah,
for a ruler will come from you
who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.'* "

C. AS "KING OF THE JEWS" HEROD SHOULD HAVE KNOWN WHERE TO FIND MESSIAH

1. Unlike Herod, we know the Scriptures, and we know him
 - a) and our lives are to lead people to Jesus, and display his love and life and the purpose of God for their lives.
2. We are called to experience more and more the revelation, the light of God in Jesus, and to play a part in others having the same Epiphany as the Magi, the same Epiphany that we have had and continue to experience in seeing, knowing and learning from Jesus

⁷ Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. ⁸ Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!"

⁷ Herod the Great, Wikipedia

* Greek *the rulers*.

* Mic 5:2; 2 Sam 5:2.

D. WHY DIDN'T HE OR HIS OFFICIALS GO?

1. Why does he just want them to tell him when they find him?
 - a) Because he isn't interested in finding the Messiah to meet him, see him and know him and acknowledge, appreciate, and worship him
2. Herod is selfish, power oriented, controlling, wanting things his own way, for his own interests
3. Jesus is a threat to him and all he stands for
 - a) Jesus is coming to liberate the oppressed, and put an end to selfish, controlling, injustice, oppressive rulership and activity
 - b) To bring an end to the rule of evil, and bring in a rule of love, justice and mercy, to bring gracious, generous leadership and salvation of all who are ostracised and hurt, weak, poor and suffering

⁹ After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were filled with joy!

E. WHAT A CONTRASTING ATTITUDE TO THE JEWISH KING THESE GENTILES ARE

1. They are open to the lead and guidance of God
 - a) Whatever light he gives, they are quick to see and follow
 - b) Even when it takes them in directions unexpected and outside their own thinking, expectation and presumptions
2. This lies at the heart of what the season of Epiphany is about

¹¹ They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

F. EPIPHANY MEANS MANIFESTATION, REVELATION

1. God has manifested and revealed himself
2. Epiphany also includes the response to a revelation of God, listening, learning, following

G. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE MAGI HERE?

1. They are full of joy when they see what God reveals
2. God has led them to meet his Son, God in the flesh
 - a) What is their response to Jesus presence?
 - (1) **Worship**
 - (2) **Giving gifts**
3. William Loader points to some Old Testament references give background to this event and talks about the Magi;

Isaiah 60:6 speaks of gifts of gold and frankincense being brought to Zion.

Psalms 72 speaks of kings coming bearing gifts of gold.

Magi (related to 'magic') indicates they are learned people from the fabled east. Astrology was an esteemed field of expertise and these experts had pinpointed the rising of the star as pointing to the birth of a ruler in Israel.

...the star moves across the sky and takes up station above the place where Jesus was born. The created world is being called to bear witness to this momentous event. The heavens declare the glory of God – in yet another way.⁸

¹² When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.

4. God took care of Jesus, and protected him from the destructive Herod

The Escape to Egypt

¹³ After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother," the angel said. "Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."

⁸ Loader

¹⁴ That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, ¹⁵ and they stayed there until Herod's death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: "I called my Son out of Egypt."*

¹⁶ Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. ¹⁷ Herod's brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ "A cry was heard in Ramah—
weeping and great mourning.
Rachel weeps for her children,
refusing to be comforted,
for they are dead."*

The Return to Nazareth

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt.

²⁰ "Get up!" the angel said. "Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead."

²¹ So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother.

²² But when he learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod's son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there. Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. ²³ So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: "He will be called a Nazarene." ⁹

5. What OT story does this passage allude to?

a) What does this teach us?

* Hos 11:1.

* Jer 31:15.

⁹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Mt 2:1-23). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

III. LESSONS

A. INCLUSIVENESS

1. Anne Le Bas;

The fact that Matthew's account of the birth of Christ focuses so much on these foreigners is not an accident, of course. It reflects a reality the early church was struggling with. Many of the first Christians were Gentiles too, like these Magi, non-Jews who had come to this new faith from a long way away – metaphorically if not literally – and who knew nothing of the culture, laws, expectations and assumptions of their Jewish brothers and sisters. That caused all sorts of tensions, and it was touch and go whether they'd be accepted.

Matthew's Magi symbolise the new and inclusive vision of the family of God which people like Paul had championed – God's welcome is for Jews and Gentiles alike. This may seem like old hat to us; it's not something that bothers us, but in fact it is still just as relevant. It is relevant not only to the issues of inclusion which the Church as a body faces today, but on a personal level too. Each of us as individuals, wherever we have come from, needs to know deep down that we are welcome in God's presence if our faith is to grow and thrive, and for different reasons we can have trouble hearing that.¹⁰

2. William Loader;

A statement is being made about Jesus' ministry and the church: the gospel is to be taught to all nations. As in the subtle additions to his genealogy, which break the pattern by naming women who have been under a cloud, many of them with Gentile connections, so here Matthew wants us to see the deeper significance of the story. This is a celebration of inclusiveness.¹¹

B. A SECOND MESSAGE IS THAT GOD WILL NOT LET ANY EVIL POWER OR AUTHORITY GET IN THE WAY OF HIS PLAN OF SALVATION.

1. As Loader continues;

The more immediate allusion, however, is to the prophecy of Balaam, who refused to cower to the murderous intentions of the evil king Balak towards

¹⁰ Anne Le Bas, Epiphany Sunday: The Beckoning Star, <http://sealpeterandpaulsermons.blogspot.com.au/2013/01/epiphany-sunday-beckoning-star.html>

¹¹ Loader

Israel, prophesying instead that a star would arise from Jacob, a sceptre from Israel (Numbers 24:17...). Matthew incorporates more than the star from the story. Herod is the evil king. Jesus is Israel. ¹²

2. Both stories show how God will in the end, protect his people and bring them salvation through the manifestation of God in the flesh.
3. Loader shows how this is reinforced in the way Jesus is taken to Egypt and back.

Another band of threads flows from the wider story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and especially of Moses. Like Israel this child and his family would go down into Egypt and return again to the promised land. The angel's advice to Joseph to return (2:13-14, 19-20) echoes the words of God to Moses in Exodus 4:19-20.

Herod's slaughter of the innocents recalls Pharaoh's slaughter of the Hebrew children. Jesus is like a new Israel, a new Moses.

Such allusions incorporate a claim that God's initiative in Christ bears the same tell-tale fingerprints of God's action found in sacred writ and so have a claim to similar authority. They 'fulfil' – a favourite term for Matthew – God's intention. Those who stand in Israel's tradition are to kneel alongside the Gentile magi in acknowledging that something recognisably divine meets us here. We need to find our ways of saying this, too.

4. Loader is pointing out how all of these scriptural stories point to the recognition of God's involvement with his people
 - a) His ongoing manifestations and revelations and appearances that Epiphany is focused on
 - b) And how God in Christ has taken the initiative to enter into our world, into our lives, to bring us out of our Egypts, and into relationship with him in his kingdom
5. Loader talks about how all these stories artfully weave a tapestry, revealing who Christ is.

The result of the weaving together of such images is a work of art, a celebration of who Christ is.

¹² Loader

The threads link Jesus to Israel's past and to the world's hopes. As if to remind us that this is not really a story about a baby, Matthew allows us to hear also the message of the cross. There would come a time when Herod's wish would come true: fate would catch up with 'the king of the Jews' and he would hang on a cross for all to see. This robs the story of any sentimentality into which it might otherwise melt. This is a tapestry of hope and of shame, of life and of death.

6. He points out how this overall story, this Epiphany is for all of us.

a) We are all part of it.

b) The message, the revelation of who Jesus is, is for every one of us and all those around us as well.

When we, as it were, kneel upon it, we place ourselves in the story. It becomes our story. It becomes the story of the little people of Bethlehem, of the children for whom Rachel weeps, of the refugees who must flee their security, of rulers who are anxious and fear change, and of people like most of us, who are seen as wise and educated and are able to offer ourselves and our gifts. One of those gifts is to be able to lead people beyond a superficial reading of the story which becomes hung up on dates of stars and into its rich fabric and its lines of verisimilitude with what we know of Herod and what we know of today's world. ¹³

7. In other words, we make a big mistake when we start getting caught up in the outward details of the stories and lose sight of the message they bring.

8. We miss the Epiphany they contain.

a) The manifestation of God in our world in Christ

b) The insights and spiritual light, inspiration and direction they give

c) And we miss the calling and invitation they give to us to respond and follow the one who has come to us, to lead us in our new life with God and to share it with others

¹³ Loader

C. ANNE LE BAS

There are two things, in particular, which I think this story communicates, across the great gulf of 2000 years of scientific development, two things these wise men tell us which are still as wise now as they were then.

The first is that the wise men understood that they were part of something greater than themselves, and we need to know that just as much as they did. The world didn't begin and end with them. They looked outside themselves, beyond themselves for wisdom. They paid attention to the universe, not just to their own preconceptions. They noticed things, things that others didn't notice. They noticed one new star among millions in the night sky. And that meant that they were also able to notice one new baby among the millions around them too. In a sense, they were wise precisely because ...they knew that they didn't know it all already. They expected the universe to surprise them. They knew it was infinitely stranger than anything they could comprehend.

They challenge us to be aware of our own tendency to miss things that aren't in our immediate field of view. They challenge us to question the assumption that we have it all worked out already, or we could have if only we were clever enough and worked hard enough at it. They challenge us to be on the lookout for new things, different things, things that disturb us and shake us out of our complacency.

"Look, listen, pay attention," say the wise men to us. "If all you ever see are the things you've already seen, what might you be missing?"

The second thing they tell us follows on from that. Noticing the star was important, but the wise men didn't just notice it. They also believed that God might speak to them through it, because they were open to the possibility that he might speak to them through anything, and so it had the potential to change their lives in some way.

That familiar Epiphany carol "We three kings" calls the star of Bethlehem a "star of wonder."

We use the word "wonder" in two different ways. We use it to describe things which are extraordinary, beautiful, great – wonder- full things - things that impress us. But we also use it in the sense of "I wonder". It is a questioning word. "I wonder why", "I wonder what would happen if..." we ask.

The “star of wonder” triggered the questions, “where?” and “who?” and “how do I get involved?”

People regularly talk to me about the turning points in their lives, moments when they have found themselves taking a new direction in life. Sometimes those turning points can seem quite bizarre when they look back; odd coincidences, strange dreams, chance remarks, words glimpsed on an advertising hoarding that would normally be quite ordinary, but somehow seem to sing with meaning at that precise moment. ...whatever they have experienced, it has started them thinking about things they know they needed to think about, started them off on a journey they are glad to have made. Whether we believe this is the voice of God, or just a bubble of wisdom rising up from our own depths, these moments can have a huge effect.

The message of the wise men is that there is a lot we can do to help us be tuned into those moments when they come. Reflective living is a habit we can embed in our lives if we choose to, and it can put us in touch daily with strength beyond our strength, wisdom beyond our wisdom, and love beyond our love. Prayer and Bible reading are an important part of this, but it's also about developing the habits of those wise men; the habit of noticing what is around us and expecting what we notice to make a difference to us. In a distracted and distracting world that's not always easy, but it is something we can learn and practice.

How often do we fail to notice the landscape around us as we hurry through it, taking it for granted, failing to notice its beauty, and its scars? “Look again!”, say the wise men. This world is the gift of God to you, the only world you have, irreplaceable, yours to care for and to share, not to own and exploit.

How often, when we are out, do we see the people around us in the crowd just as bodies standing in our way? “Look again!”, say the wise men. And when we do, what do we see? We see a woman worrying about getting to her job on time, fearful that if she doesn't she will lose it, or an employer, weighed down by the knowledge that he'll have to make staff redundant, or a teenager, feeling awkward and insecure and covering it up with bravado, or a child, bewildered and overwhelmed by a world that seems huge to them. When the eyes of our hearts are opened we realise that every nameless face in the crowd is a child of God, just as we are, loved by God and of infinite

value to him, and that makes all the difference to the way we treat one another.

Epiphany means shining forth, revelation. ...God's light can shine forth from the heavens, and the earth, and the person standing next to us, and the hidden corners of our own lives if we have eyes to see it. And I believe too that God's love is revealed in the rich variety of his creation, love which can transform us just as it did the wise men in that ancient, baffling story which we celebrate today.¹⁴

CONCLUSION:

I. EPIPHANY REMINDS US:

A. TO BE OPEN AWARE OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN OUR LIVES

1. To be open to God's communication and revealing of himself to us
2. To be aware of Jesus' and his presence in our world and all he is doing and calling us to share and be involved with
3. This story reminds us of the mysterious and varied ways God draws us to him
4. And the way he wants us to respond in worship and giving, and joining Jesus in the new life he has invited us to share
5. And showing through our words and deeds, that Jesus is alive and present in our lives
6. It reminds us that those who plot to hurt and harm the innocent, those who work against God and his people will not succeed

¹⁴ Anne Le Bas, *Star of Wonder, Sermon for Epiphany*, PRCL, <http://listserv.louisville.edu/wa?A0=prcl-l>

a) But God, through his Son and Spirit will bring salvation to all in the end

7. And finally, it reminds us that God loves and includes everyone, and wants us to do the same

a) He wants us to be part of God's epiphany, to be witnesses, showing forth his love and salvation to the world around us

B. PRAYER
