

“Not All Who Wander Are Lost”
January 8, 2023
Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

I’m not a Tolkien scholar, much as I wish I were, so in spite of the sermon title I’m not building this around his work. Not entirely. The quote I use, “Not all who wander are lost,” comes from a poem the character Bilbo recites in Tolkien’s book *The Fellowship of the Ring*, a poem created in honor of Bilbo’s friend Aragorn who is heir to the kingdom of Gondor but also a Ranger who wanders the land fighting the enemies of Middle-earth. The point is wandering doesn’t have to be aimless; there are those who wander with purpose.

Reading these passages for Epiphany made me think of Tolkien’s words: between the image of Isaiah when all will make their way to Zion, those who were once removed and those who have been lost and the story of the magi in Matthew’s gospel who travel the desert to pay homage to the newborn king. The Bible is filled with wanderers. Most are not lost but have a purpose in mind, though there are times when it seems pointless. But as we learn in Matthew, the wandering of the magi has purpose. They see a star, a light rising in the west, and go to see what it means.

The traditional interpretation of this story points us to the movement of the gospel into the Gentile world. It’s told as a way of illustrating how even those outside the faith are converted to worship of God through Christ. That implies that other ways of knowing God, other forms of light, are inferior or even invalid. And that made sense for a gospel written in a time when the Christian community was struggling to exist and considered by the Roman world to be subversive and dangerous. But I’m not sure it’s an interpretation we need to hold onto today. I think it’s time we did a little wandering ourselves, wandering away from exclusivism and into appreciation for other forms of light that can help illuminate our path.

That’s what I see happening in this story in Matthew. The magi come not to be converted but to acknowledge the arrival on the scene of the Divine Presence revealed in the Christ. They honor that Presence just as they do the Divine Presence in their own world. We live in a world where it’s possible to stand alongside people of many faiths, where the light is revealed in many forms. The Divine Presence can be found in Torah and Koran, in the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads of Hinduism, in the Dhammapada of Buddhism, in the teachings of the Good Mind among the Haudenosaunee, as well as the Christ child and the life of Jesus. And we are invited to wander among them all, not to become lost but to find in them new insights and deeper awareness of the rich diversity of the Divine.

For so long we have been taught to protect our truths, to keep them uncorrupted by the influence of other faiths. But this story suggests there may be an alternative. Maybe it’s possible to live alongside other faiths and learn from them, to share our truth without insisting it be

adopted by everyone else. The celebration of Epiphany is a celebration of God's voice revealed in light, all light, not just ours. And wherever it's found it brings joy.

That's one theme from Tolkien worth exploring more. If you read his books, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy or *The Silmarillion*, you'll find they're filled with a lot of adventure and fighting but they're also filled with joy. There's one character in particular I've always been drawn to. He only shows up for a short time but his influence is felt everywhere. His name is Tom Bombadil and he lives in the Old Forest at the heart of their world. It's easy to overlook his importance; he's usually dismissed as a comic diversion. But as one scholar of Tolkien puts it, "Bombadil is the light of joy." The wonderful thing about these stories is their insistence that all forms of light are welcome. All of them band together, hobbits, elves, dwarves and humans, to fight the evil that threatens the destruction of Middle-earth. And each of them has light to offer, so that joy can abound.

One thing I hear in the words of Isaiah and Matthew is an irresistible joy. All the peoples of the world will come with joy to Jerusalem, to gather in the light of God's presence there. The magi are overwhelmed with joy when they make their way to Bethlehem and the house where the Christ child lives. No matter how frightening or dark the world becomes, light brings joy and in the light of God's presence everyone finds hope.

I think that's the message of Epiphany. It's not that our understanding replaces or supersedes all the others. The light of Christ adds to the light of the world and we're encouraged at every step in our wandering to seek more light. We join the magi in their quest, we walk with the multitudes toward Jerusalem, we are with the disciples when Jesus tells them, "You are the light of the world," and with unending joy we give thanks that in Christ light comes into the world and darkness cannot overcome it.

So, let yourself wander in the light and be brought with joy to the table of God's presence. Discover here the light of Christ and never be lost again.

Amen