

“The Mystery Revealed”
January 5, 2025
Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

The story of the Magi is shrouded in mystery, I suppose, because it's told under cover of darkness. Being in the dark in other gospels is a negative thing; it indicates ignorance or confusion. But here in Matthew's gospel darkness is where everything is revealed. An angel visits Joseph in his dreams. The Magi set their course by the stars. Darkness doesn't hold the kind of threat it often does in other stories in the Bible. It's a place of hope and comfort.

The Magi are a curious group of people. Tradition has reduced them to three in number, but elevated them to the status of kings. The gospel doesn't say that at all. I think what the writer of this story imagined was a larger group of travelers, astrologers and priests, along with their various servants. What comes from the east is a caravan of pilgrims seeking answers to the mystery they perceive in the heavens. Probably they come from the kingdom of Persia. We don't learn much about Persia in our history classes but during the time of the gospels, Persia was Rome's greatest rival. They fought off and on for centuries, but Rome never conquered them.

So, it's something of a coup that the birth of Jesus should attract the attention and homage of these Persian officials who would never have given the same honor to Caesar. In fact, what this gospel describes is a rejection of Roman rule. The Magi come looking for “the child who has been born king of the Jews,” while they're speaking to King Herod, who's supposed to be the king of the Jews. But Herod was placed in that position by Rome. These Magi, innocently I'm sure, are disrespecting Herod and the whole system that put him in power.

And maybe that's why the Gentiles who worship the Child are Persian and not Roman. You'd be hard-pressed to find a Roman willing to risk undermining Caesar's authority by acknowledging Jesus as king. No one would believe that could happen. And it could be the community around the writer of Matthew's gospel was under a lot of pressure from Roman authorities. It was inconceivable that Romans could be brought around. But there were other Gentiles who might be convinced at the highest levels. The mysterious Persians could see through the darkness what Rome refused to accept.

Stories in the gospels are always more than just historical accounts. While Jesus taught in parables as a way to disarm and intrigue his followers, the stories about Jesus are also parables meant to make the reader think differently about how God works in the world and through whom God is revealed. In this story from Matthew's gospel, God is working through foreigners, the Magi from the exotic east, and they understand much more clearly the significance of Jesus' birth than all the scholars and priests of Jerusalem.

Finding God in unexpected places and through unexpected people is a theme that runs through the whole New Testament. And it creates a model for us modern Christians. It's a challenge to us to think more broadly about how God is revealed in our world. We have a tendency to be comfortable in our traditions and doctrines and beliefs. We don't like to have the worldview we've been taught all our lives dismantled and pulled apart. But the experience of

disillusionment, having our illusions shattered, is the path for spiritual growth and it can lead to material change as well.

The writer of Ephesians looked at what was happening in the communities he addressed and realized something earth-shattering was unfolding. He says a mystery was being revealed among them. The mystery wasn't some secret knowledge that would catapult them into heaven or release them from worldly concerns. The mystery was even Gentiles, those people who had always been considered beyond the scope of God's concern, even they were now part of God's family in Christ.

The writer of Ephesians describes what Franciscan priest, Father Richard Rohr, calls the "Universal Christ," in his book by the same title. The universal Christ is revealed through qualities of faith, hope and love within us that have nothing to do with doctrine or belief. These qualities are discovered through experience, by paying attention to the world around us and responding to the mutual bonds of humanity we share with others. Even when those bonds are violated. Rohr tells the story in his book of a woman named Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was murdered at Auschwitz in 1943. She left behind a collection of letters and journals that give some insight into her experience. She writes at one point: "In spite of everything you always end up with the same conviction: life is good after all, it's not God's fault that things go awry sometimes, the cause lies in ourselves. And that's what stays with me, even now, when I'm about to be packed off to Poland with my whole family."

That is an unimaginably positive worldview considering her circumstances. I don't know if I could hold onto such a deep affirmation if it were happening to me. Rohr writes about Etty, "Etty Hillesum is but one example of another function of the Christ: a universally available 'voice' that calls all things to *become whole and true to themselves*. God's two main tools in this direction, from every appearance, seem to be great love and great suffering—and often great love that *invariably leads* to great suffering." I think the writer of Ephesians understood how the universal Christ was present in the lives of those in the community he was writing and that presence transcended all the differences that may have existed between them.

When we try to constrict Christ by insisting on certain beliefs or certain behaviors or certain forms of relationships, we obscure God's presence in the world. When we insist that certain people must remain on the margins or hidden or silent, we become the Herods of this world who want nothing more than to extinguish the light of God's love and eliminate any attempt to widen the circle of acceptance and inclusion.

The Magi respond to the entrance of love into the world without concern for orthodoxy or protocol. They don't examine it to be sure it's proper. They embrace it recklessly, with complete abandon. That's the effect Christ has on those who are open to the movement of God in the world. For the Christians in Ephesus, struggling to maintain their community against forces trying to divide them and make them conform, embracing Christ among them transcended all their differences. The things that divided them were imposed on them from a society that prefers division over unity because divided people are easier to control. But the mystery revealed among them was Christ lives in us all, so all are included in the circle of God's love.

That's the lesson of Epiphany. It's about acknowledging and embracing a world where all are welcome into the light of God's presence. No matter what the world might do to divide us or pit us against one another, what we learn in Christ is those divisions are an illusion. They're a sham. We are meant for more than that. We are called to look within ourselves as though we are searching the infinite heavens and find the light of God's presence rising within us, a light that compels us forward into the darkness to discover the Christ who lives in us. We are the bearers of Christ in the world. The mystery is revealed through us. Open your hearts, your minds, your spirits, to the great love and great suffering God seeks to manifest in you. Embrace Christ who lives in you and let the light of God shine through you in acts of love and compassion in our dark world. And do not be afraid but rejoice for God is with us.

Amen