

WORSHIP

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Better Late Than Never

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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and



myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me...twelve drummers drumming, eleven pipers piping, ten lords a leaping, nine ladies dancing, eight maids a milking, seven swans a swimming, six geese a laying, five golden rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree...

Maybe your car radio was dialed into 104.7 during the month of December like mine was. They play wall-to-wall Christmas carols from December 1 to December 25, but I don't ever remember hearing the full rendition of the 12 Days of Christmas – because it just takes...too...long...and the radio station knows that most of us will tune out after about three minutes and go searching for something else.

I went to Starbucks on Christmas Eve to fuel up for the big night here at church. After putting their special holiday-themed cups in circulation around mid-November, on Christmas Eve they handed me my venti Pike Place with no-room in a plain white cup. On Christmas Eve!

The marketing gurus know that we are pretty predictable people. When the dishes are washed after the big Christmas meal we turn our attention to making New Year's resolutions. And then – about a week into those good-intentions – we start to covet the Valentine's chocolate that shows up on the grocery-store shelves. Most of the time we live our lives focused on the next thing.

But today – because we're the church and it's okay to be different – we are still hanging onto Christmas. Barely. The Christmas season is marked by twelve days – ending with Epiphany (which is tomorrow).

The word "Epiphany" literally, means "manifestation," or "showing." Or, less literally, it is a moment of recognition. Today's reading is the last story we will



hear this Christmas. It serves as the bridge to Epiphany. I am reading from the second chapter of Matthew's gospel. Listen with me for a word from God.

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If you were in worship last month you probably noticed the beautiful new nativity set that Dianne and Larry Maye donated to our church. We have used the nativity set to tell the Christmas story with our children during children's time.

Nativity sets like ours are not only beautiful – but they are effective at communicating a story with so many moving parts. The nativity captures – in one frame – all the characters – something even the gospels themselves fail to do.

Usually, in nativity sets and in nativity plays – the wise men are – appropriately – the last ones to show up on the scene.

What we may forget – however – is just how late they really were.

A lot of scholars think that the wise men met Jesus when he was almost two years old. They have good reason for that. Although you almost never hear a sermon on this part of the story, you may remember that after the wise men skirted Herod on their way out of town, the King became enraged and ordered the slaughter of all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger – based on Herod's knowledge of the "exact time" the star that the wise men had followed appeared.

In order to capture the picture of the story that we have in our minds, if the wise men had shown up on the nativity set nearly two years after Christmas – instead of a young couple with a sleeping baby – they would have seen Jesus who may have outgrown the manger, Mary and Joseph – a little haggard from parenting a toddler, angels with voices long-gone after singing hallelujahs, and shepherds who were already onto their next generation of sheep.

And that would have made for a very different kind of scene.



In reality – by the time the wise men showed up with their treasure chests of gold, frankincense and myrrh – those parents and that toddler had gone on living their lives. We might think that with such a spectacular birth the people from Bethlehem and all the region surrounding it would have come running – filled with expectation and joy about the news of the savior being born – but in fact, from what we can tell, hardly anyone noticed.

For Mary and Joseph, I seriously doubt the memory of that first Christmas night faded – certainly, they knew that this child of theirs was special – after a miraculous conception, and angels visiting them both in dreams and in reality.

But after huddling around that manger for a while and listening to the angels sing – life happened: the baby needed to be fed and have his swaddling clothes changed, Joseph and Mary needed to find a proper place to live, and the world kept on turning...like it always does.

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In the way that Matthew tells it, the wise men were the first ones outside of that nativity scene to recognize what was going on.

Matthew's gospel doesn't tell us what happened after Mary, Joseph, and Jesus left the stable to move on to the next part of their lives. What we do hear is that – far away from the hillsides of Bethlehem – a star appeared to people who were considered wise – and those wise-ones decided to follow – somehow understanding that the star announced the birth of the one who would be a new King.

I've always wondered what the wise-men's journey was like. It is believed that the wise men lived in what we know of today as Iraq. That's not close to Bethlehem – but it's also not two years away.

How long after the star appeared did it take the wise men to know what it meant? Did they debate whether or not to leave home to seek after it, or let it just stay shining on the horizon? Along the way, did they question the purpose of their journey?



I doubt the path the wise men took to Bethlehem was a straight line. I imagine that there was a lot of deliberation, a decent amount of second-guessing, a willingness to take the time – and a few wrong turns – to see where the path was supposed to lead.

Eventually, they arrived – maybe not to the nativity, but to meet Jesus with a recognition of just how significant his life was going to be.

Though they already knew he was special, I also imagine that when those wise-men showed up proclaiming the truth about their son, Mary and Joseph had another moment of recognition, too...maybe an awareness that had gotten lost in the haze of living their lives always focused on the next thing:

that the promise and hope found in their child was bigger than a manger, or their hometown, or their own dreams.

But that their child was a light to the nations – attracting visitors from afar;

and that their child represented change that frightened those like Herod, whose power came from keeping things the way they were;

and that the change their child would come to bring would impact the course of their lives – as parents charged with his security and care.

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Sometimes we forget that it took a while to realize the impact of what it meant for God to slip into our world in the person of Jesus.

One of the things I so appreciate about the way Matthew tells the story of Christmas is that he takes his time. The story doesn't all fit neatly into one frame – because that's really not how faith works. The way Matthew tells it, there is an unfolding awareness of what that baby born in a manger will mean for our world.

And I think that is really good news.

Not just that the savior was born.



But that it is never too late to recognize the truth –

and that there is always more we can learn and appreciate about the truth that we think we know –

and that just when we believe we have wrapped our arms around who Jesus is, there is something new to discover.

God chose to enter our world when we were moving at the speed of life.

God revealed himself to a people who were distracted and always chasing after the next thing. That was true way back then...and it is true today.

Sometimes in my work as a pastor – and in my life as a disciple – I find that we worry when our faith ebbs and flows, or when don't immediately recognize where God is active in our world, or when we just get so overwhelmed by our day-to-day that we lose perspective on what really matters.

So if you have ever had that worry – or you are still searching for what it means that God cared enough to get involved in the real stuff of our lives – just remember that you are in good company – that epiphany's take time – and that the light will continue to shine to guide us in the ways of truth.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.

