

“Outsiders becoming insiders”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

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While many Americans have already ceased their Christmas celebrations, tossing out their trees and turning to new year’s resolutions, much of the world remains in wonder at the birth of the Christ child. Epiphany—when we celebrate the visitation of the wise men—is one of the holiest days in Christianity. In fact, in many parts of the world, it’s bigger than Christmas itself.

Last night, in Latin America, children placed shoeboxes, brimming with grass, outside their homes, under their beds, or beneath their Christmas trees. This morning they woke to find the grass eaten by the magi’s camels, replaced with gifts. Instead of writing a wish list to Santa, they wrote their wish lists to the magi, who passed by their houses on their way to Jesus.

In Bulgaria, and in Greece, and all over Russia, thousands of Orthodox Christians dove into freezing water to seek out a wooden cross, buried beneath the waves—something they’ve been doing for centuries.

Meanwhile, in Madrid, fireworks exploded in radiant color over the city. And in Rome, Pope Francis made his own pilgrimage to children’s hospitals and orphanages.

The reason for all this celebration is that Epiphany marks the day when we get to become part of the Christmas story too. Today, we travel to the manger, just as the magi once did. Today we find out who God is.

Of course, it may be that it never occurred to you that you might have anything in common with those mysterious magi of old. Tradition and countless hymns and pageants have built them up with such regal luxury that they can feel as distant as the Christmas story itself. All of which begs the question: do we really know the magi?

Let’s play a game to find out. I’m going to make a statement and you’re going to tell me if it’s true or false. We’ll start with an easy one.

1. *The Bible tells us that the magi, or wise men, visited the baby Jesus.*
True! We just read that story a couple minutes ago!
2. *The magi appear in at least two of the Gospels.*
False! The magi are only in the Gospel of Matthew. Luke makes no mention of the wise men. Mark doesn’t even have a birth story. And John prefers to get all philosophical.
3. *The magi arrive just after Jesus is born, joining the shepherds.*
False! Luke talks about shepherds, not Matthew. And while we aren’t told how long it took the magi to find Jesus, the length of their journey and the fact that Herod orders the execution

of all boys two years and younger suggest that Jesus was probably a toddler by the time the magi arrived.

4. *The magi bring three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

True! Though these were likely just gifts of hospitality; it was only later that they were interpreted as symbolic.

5. *There are three wise men.*

False! The Bible never says how many wise men visit Jesus. We think there were three because three gifts are mentioned. But this was not always the consensus. One early tradition said there were 12 wise men. Most likely, they traveled in a large caravan.

6. *The three wise men were kings.*

False! Matthew never calls them kings. The Greek word used is *magoi*, from which our English word *magic* is derived, meaning they'd probably be more at home at Hogwarts than in a palace. The idea that they were kings probably comes from Psalm 72 and Isaiah 60, which we read today. And in the Middle Ages, Christian kings were quick to embrace the idea.

7. *The three wise men were astrologers, foreigners, and adherents of a pagan, heretical religion.*

True! These were studied astronomers who believed they could discern the future in the stars. They came from east of Judea, possibly Arabia, Babylon, or Persia. They may have been priests of Zoroastrianism, a religion that believed in a single creator God whose goodness was locked in battle with evil, and whose adherents awaited the birth of a savior.

In other words, a lot of what we think we know about the magi comes from much later traditions and not from the Bible. All the Bible really tells us is that some foreigners came in search of a savior, a king, and when they met him, they were overcome with joy. They gave him presents. They chose to defy the powers-at-be and not report him to Herod, their civil disobedience saving his life. That's all we know.

And that's all we really need to know. Once stripped of their crowns and all our grand traditions, the magi appear as they are—not figures of power or mystery, but strangers in a foreign land, vulnerable and confused, weary and afraid, Arab Gentiles, pagans, heretics, desperate enough to make a dangerous journey, in search of meaning, of hope, of God. In short, the magi are outsiders.

They're no different than the millions of people today who are desperate for their lives to make sense, who open countless self-help books and consult gurus, who try yoga and meditation and psychotherapy, who start a new career or a new relationship, who make a new year's resolution or purchase some new shiny thing, all in hopes that it will finally be the thing that changes their life. They're no different than the refugees who come to our borders in search of safe harbor, or the guy who gets out of prison and has nowhere to go, or the person who doesn't know how to live with this grief, this diagnosis, this aging.

They're no different than the person who wanders into the church, stumbling through the unfamiliar liturgy and hymns, wondering if God is really here. And they're no different than the person who has been here a long time but has lost touch with what brought them here to begin with.

Robert Dannals writes, "The magi's journey could be any of our own. We know about deserts and dry places and thirst, if not of the body, then of the soul and the heart. We know about looking into the stars and, in a thousand other places, searching for hope and love and meaning. We know about wanting to find someone who can be trusted to guide us on our journey. We know about dark places and the ruthlessness that can take hold of people when they feel threatened and afraid. We know about being on the outside looking in, the times when we've not been included, and we know when we've done that to others."

In short, we are the magi. It's why Matthew makes such a point of including them. They're us.

And what's so amazing, what's so life-changing, and life-saving, is that it is they, the outsiders, who are invited into this story. Not Herod. Not the priests or scribes or wealthy families of Judea. Not the Roman emperor or prefect. Not a single king. Not any of the people who have made it their life's business to keep the insiders in and the outsiders out. It's the magi, who travel from the hurting borders of our lives, from the outside, who are invited into the manger with Christ. These men who, like the shepherds, would not have been welcome in God's Temple, who were said to be unclean, unorthodox, unwelcome, unsafe—it's they who are brought into God's presence.

And what they find there is a God tucked away in poverty, hunted by the powers of the world, enfolded in a chunky, vulnerable infant, determined to save the world by love, to save them and you and me. They find a God of outsiders, who is drilling Her way inside, who is breaking every boundary between out and in, between welcome and unwelcome, between loved and unloved.

In the presence of such a God, the magi are no longer outsiders. They are insiders. And so are we.

It's easy to dismiss the seekers, the people with their self-help books and their new fads, their blended new-age spiritualities. It's easy to dismiss the people who wander in here and don't worship the way we do, or understand God the way we do, or behave the way we do. It's easy to dismiss the people who don't fit, or whose life took a wrong turn, or who seem to ask too much of us. It's easy to dismiss the hurts and the margins of our own lives.

But these are the very people—we are the very people—who come to the baby Jesus today. We may not have any idea what we'll find. We may have spent a lifetime looking in the wrong places. We may come, incomplete, hurting, confused, afraid. And it doesn't matter. God has called us. Outsiders.

God has called us home. We are the ones God wants. The children *God* has been seeking.

So remember: God doesn't want your three kings; God wants your outsiders. **Amen.**