

THE RABBI AND THE MAGI
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The Epiphany of the Lord
January 9, 2022

Good morning, and Happy New Year! As I thought of wishing you a Happy New Year from the pulpit this morning, it occurred to me that our scripture readings for this great feast of Epiphany, at the beginning of the new year, announce emphatically not a new year, but a new era of God's journey with humanity. In a couple of verses that I think deserve more attention than they usually get, Paul speaks of a mystery that has been made known to him by revelation (Eph. 3:3):

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, **the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and share in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.** (Eph. 3:5-6)

The concept of mysteries kept secret for generations now revealed was a common one in Jewish literature during this period of time. Paul, writing in this Jewish tradition, tells of a mystery now revealed to him that is unlike any other. What he is saying is that the unique relationship of the Jewish people with God, and the promises made to them by God, had always been intended to apply to Gentiles as well--that is, to all people. Only now, though, is God making this truth known. And he is making it known through the person, ministry, and message of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

If that's not an audacious claim I don't know what is. Essentially, Paul is saying that it had been God's plan all along to include all people in what had up until now been the special province of the Jewish people: a special, personal relationship with God as his chosen people. Yes, the Jews had come first, and would always retain their unquestioned position with respect to God; but the invitation to be included was now extended to the whole of humanity, without exception.

Many modern people of faith, Jews and Christians alike, have thought that the idea that Jesus opened access to God for Gentiles in a way that was previously reserved for Jews was a stretch, to say the very least. Isn't it revisionist history, they ask? Isn't it only because Jesus clearly didn't turn out to be what the Jews expected of a messiah that the Jesus movement essentially failed as a Jewish movement and became a Gentile one?

Paul answers this question very clearly, which is why this passage deserves more attention than it usually gets. His answer is, absolutely not. This is not revisionist history but was God's intention from the beginning. And, in his usual bold and audacious way, Paul says that this was revealed to him, and to others, directly by the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 3:5)

A lot hinges on this, really. My 12-year-old continues to remind me in various ways that her out-of-nowhere announcement to me three Christmases ago--"Dad, religion is my pet peeve"-- is still where she stands. She continues to think that all religion is made up. And I continue to be proud of her--she's thinking for herself! And once again, it really can be argued that Jesus didn't pan out as a Jewish messiah, and that the other traditions that grew up around him were, well, made up. But Paul very directly and powerfully counters this. The key idea is that what God was doing was kept partly and mysteriously hidden for a very long time. And it was brought out of hiding and revealed in its fullness when the time was right. God's work would not be done until all people were invited to the table. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection were the beginning of this process, the beginning of a new age. Jesus was a messiah who came, not to herald the end of time, but to make all things new.

Paul gives us the biblical theology on this matter, but Matthew gives us the imagery for it. Three magi--probably Zoroastrians, maybe astrologers, certainly with no knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, and quite frankly wacky figures to be showing up in a serious biblical narrative--see a star. They don't know the scriptures, so prophecy is of no help to them. They need a natural sign--and God gives them one. And so indeed, Gentiles were included in the story of Jesus--and worshipped him--from the very beginning of his life.

What a juxtaposition of biblical texts this is. Paul, the rabbi, the theologian--steeped in the thought world and traditions of his forbears--and the Zoroastrian magi. Paul would have been horrified by them. And yet the magi illustrate the truth of what Paul says was revealed to him, in a dramatic, colorful way that feels compellingly true because it would be so very hard to make it up. Paul may not have been able to conceive of including figures like the magi, but God was, and God did.

Where do you find yourself in the texts we have explored today? And how do you think they speak to us as Grace Episcopal Church, Ossining? We live in such a perilous time. I don't need to spell this out for you. There are those who say we are simply foolish to talk about anything like the light of Christ at all. But the biblical position is always that light is juxtaposed with darkness; remember, the visit of the magi is followed by the slaughter of the innocents. The darkness around us is to be expected; and so is our commitment to the truth that in Christ there is no darkness at all.

So again: what about you, and what about us? I like to think that three things are true. First, that this parish ought to shine like that ancient star for all who are seeking a home in the Body of Christ; second, that all who come ought to find God here; and third, that we ought to be shining the light of our star wherever there is need, wherever there is suffering, wherever there is brokenness, until all are included at the banquet table that Jesus has spread. May God give us grace, this Epiphany Sunday and always, to shine.