

### *Huge World, Little Town*

Scripture Lessons: John 1:10-18, Matthew 2:1-12

#### *The Text*

We call them “wise men,” but the word “Magi” has a richer meaning. They were “sages,” astrologers, dream interpreters, philosophers, seekers of truth wherever they might find it. Really, these travelers were priests from a completely foreign religion, looking for a king predicted by a faith that was not their own.

The text reveals their qualities of spirit. They were open and inquiring. Candid and remarkably trusting. They were sincere and candid to strangers. They certainly were persistent searchers.

As foreigners in a strange land, they went to the place where they anticipated news of the birth of a king would be found: at a palace, in the place of royalty. There they met a very different person - Herod. He is a foreigner in Judea, too, and he knows less about the scripture prophecy than the Magi do. He is inquiring but less than candid; persistent, but certainly not sincere. He is defensive, because he sees the threat to power and position. He finds the information – not to help them in their search, but to use them for his purposes.

If you were at the Christmas Pageant this year, you saw yours truly playing the only guy in the drama who wasn't true – King Herod. Call it type casting. I had one line, and the director reminded me to say it with a sinister tone: “Go and search for the child. And when you have found him, come and tell me so I may go and worship him.” At the rehearsal, one of the wise men replied, “Yeah, right!” The Magi trusted their dreams more than Herod, and went home without making the detour back to Jerusalem.

#### *The Context*

We see the Magi gathered with the Shepherds in the manger scene with the star overhead, with their gifts for the Christ child wrapped up like presents. It makes a nice, complete picture. And since we give gifts at Christmas, we tend to focus on their gifts more than their trip. The text is not so tidy. It says they finally came to the “house,” and it doesn't say when. Why a house? Remember, Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for an extended time for the census, and she had just had a baby. A cave barn and a manger were probably exchanged for better quarters.

The Magi find them. The real point is not their gifts, but their trip. They were searchers, and they came a long way. They have their own story to tell, and the early church thought it was really important. Epiphany is the new day after the twelfth day of Christmas, and it belongs to the Magi. It was celebrated as the earliest Christian holy day. The world was turning from the longest night back toward the light that was increasing in the world. EPIPHANY put a spotlight on the Kingship of Jesus as the promised Messiah for the Jews who had turned Christian. But the story said more: It said that non-Jews – Gentiles, pagans, people completely foreign to the prophecies would recognize Jesus as a king and savior, too.

These sages were guided by their own religion. They saw God in the stars. It was a rising star of a coming king. They also took the guidance of the Old Testament prophecy of a different religion in Micah. When they finally find him, they have great joy at their discovery, worship this child king, and give gifts.

Epiphany is the celebration of *validation!* Jesus is MESSIAH, but not just for the Jews, for the world. And later he commands his Jewish followers to go into the whole world. The early church celebrated EPIPHANY – the coming of light into the world, the birth of a religious king for all people – because the Magi from another religion showed that God’s promise was a Savior for all people, including them. They came to understand clearly that God loved the whole world so much, that he sent his Son.

Epiphany morning is when we can really sing “Joy to the World” – and continue the joy that Magi felt when they found the baby king, ...and the joy that Jews and Gentiles alike felt because Jesus was king of a new kingdom that made them one instead of separating them.

### *THEN and NOW*

EPIPHANY was the call to take the light of the gospel, the message of Christ, the hope and peace, the love and joy, to all people so that no one would walk in darkness. Paul’s missionary work was the complement of the Magi’s journey. He was the Jew converted to follower who spread the gospel to the Greeks. The Magi came from the world, and the followers were commanded to go into all the world. Jesus is a king whom kings do not understand, but sincere seekers will always find him.

Paul is the one who wrote: “...there is no Jew or Greek, bond or free, male or female. We are all One in Christ. Because Jesus did not cling to equality with God but became a human person, we are all one with God and one with each other.”

We can look at a baby born in humility and see ourselves and all others in a way we never could see without his light.

### *Huge Cosmos, Little Town*

The New Testament makes an astounding claim about Jesus: He is “the light of the world.” He is the epiphany for the whole cosmos – the light of the whole Hubbell telescope world! It does not say that Jesus might be, may be, could be some day in the long distant future when everything works out in God’s plan. The New Testament does not say, “He *will* be Lord.” It says, “Jesus Christ *is* Lord.” Epiphany is the announcement of what God did to save the whole cosmos in the coming of Jesus to live among us, and what God has done never ends. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.”

Epiphany is the reason for the other “e-word.” ...you know, that word that Presbyterians don’t even want to say in church: evangelism. The whole idea makes us nervous. Epiphany changes what we think about evangelism. In its light, we can see that evangelism may not be as scary for Presbyterians as we seem to think.

We Presbyterians over-reacted to the frontier “scare the hell out of you” approach to evangelism that has dominated American religious culture for two centuries. We ran away from

the “cry-confess-and-dunk-them” theology of salvation. “If you will confess, God will save.” The “if” theology was much more about what would happen if you didn’t. The bad news was more certain than the “if” of the good news. We Presbyterians have an aversion to fear and guilt as good motivators for love and kindness, and frankly, history seems to prove us right on that one.

But we have a real problem. We “threw the baby out with the bath water” – to pun a phrase. Seeing some defects in the ways that others were going out to spread the light of the gospel, we Presbyterians decided to wait for the seekers to come to us. We have thought that our trained ministers and beautiful sanctuaries and fine programs and good music would attract the wise people. Like the movie “Field of Dreams,” we thought that if we built it, they would come. And we have waited at the door to welcome some of them – the wise ones.

And our approach is been, well let’s just say it out loud – a failure. We have gotten smaller instead of growing. We have gotten defensive, and we have looked for anyone and everyone to blame – as long as they were someone else. We’ve blamed the denomination, or the presbyteries, or the liberals, or the conservatives, or the old music people, or the new praise people, or the social activists, or anyone – so long as it has kept us from asking what we have done or not done to contribute to our problem – like maybe fail to celebrate and share the great openness and goodness of the gospel that has been the center our Reformed tradition.

We are scared of evangelism. We now avoid calling a committee an evangelism committee, and some congregations don’t have one by any name. We have gotten defensive and maybe even survivalist. We are really more interested in getting the right new members who will help us grow and pay the bills, more than we are impassioned about how we can help new people know and grow a new life and great joy in the saving love of Christ.

We Presbyterians have forgotten that the Magi found the baby a long way from the fine furnishings. When they got to Bethlehem and kept asking questions about where the king was born, people knew where the couple was living, because the shepherders had spread the word about all they had heard and seen to everyone they saw. Mary and Joseph and the baby king had become the talk of the little town of Bethlehem.

Presbyterians have good news to share! Not “ifs” about it. Presbyterians do NOT tell people what God might do to save them *if* they do the right things or say the right things. Presbyterians announce the Good News of what God has already done in the gift of Jesus Christ to save the whole world – and each of us. Out of divine love lived in human flesh, we are already one in God’s love, and we can learn to live that different love until the whole world is one.

People are always talking about the terrible problems in the world. The solution to the world’s problems is so obvious, so simple, so easy – in the different light of God’s epiphany in Jesus. The way to save the world is already right in front of us in a model that anyone can follow. It’s like the book says, “Life is in him, and he is a light for the whole world.” We are called to walk in the light, just as he is in the light. We are just called to be like the shepherds and tell everyone we know.

### *Our Little Town*

In case you haven’t noticed, the huge world has come to our little town of Brenham. There are all kinds of people on Main Street, all ages and shades of people everywhere you go. The Fall

festival and Christmas parade were a celebration of countless children all around. There is an energetic and a positive spirit, and a warmth and friendliness. Brenham is a wonderful little town. People are open and inquiring and candid, not defensive. They are remarkably trusting and sincere. It's like there is a whole town of Magi just outside the church doors.

Our little Presbyterian Church can't wait for the Magi to come knocking on the door. Past the epiphany, our calling is to go to all the different people in the world that has come so close to us, and share good news of great joy.

We need to focus on the task at hand that God has put in our hands. We need to be focused more on God's world than our little church. We need to be a little less occupied with our internal "stuff," with the long, checkered past of our mixed attempts at living with each other and maybe putting up with each other. We need to be less focused on what "they" are doing to "my" church, or who did what to whom to cause some trouble that hurt somebody. We need to remember who the King is around here, whose church this church really is, and who we said we would follow when we walked in the door. That way we can be more interested in what is going on beyond the doors in the world where Christ is already Lord and Savior, and we can be more interested in making sure that we show Christ to the world by the way we live with each other inside these doors.

Our models are the Magi, the shepherders, the early church, and the followers of the ages. We, all of us, each one of us, are the ones to go out into the world that is right on our street and in our stores and next door to our houses, and share good news that Christmas is still going strong, that light is growing in the world, that a Savior is with us. Our pattern is the baby who became the shepherd king. We can see life in a different light, because we walk in his light. And we want to share that light and life with everyone we see. It is so obvious, so simple, so easy. We just need to invite friends and strangers, live our faith openly and sincerely, welcome anyone and everyone who wants to come see the Christ child, and give them the love we have received.

The church has celebrated Epiphany through the ages, not because three wise foreigners journeyed to see the Christ child. We still celebrate Christ's coming to the whole world, because we have good news of great joy for all the people, and we are called to share it with everyone we meet.