

Betsey Moe
Sermon 1.3.10
“The Journey Out”
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, 2asking, ‘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.’ 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6“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.” ’

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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.’ 9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Inclusion is not a natural human inclination. My son Owen who is four comes home from preschool and tells me about the territory wars that go on on that innocent-looking playground at the corner of our church. Evidently, there’s not enough room at the top of that slide for two of them, and they haven’t yet learned the art of playing gracefully together. My favorite recent Owen quote is, “Jay just doesn’t understand what preschool is all about.” Evidently, Jay missed the orientation class that Owen taught at some point. You see, in Owen’s class, there are insiders (himself) and outsiders (everyone else).

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the divine revelation that God’s grace has been extended to *all* through Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the circle of God’s love has been widened, blown open, to include not just Israel, but gentiles too. And the story that the church traditionally uses to illustrate this point is the journey of the gentile wise men – complete outsiders who are drawn in from far off by the light of God.

Talk about outsiders, you really couldn't find people living farther outside the Jewish worldview than these wise men. We sing about them as "three kings" because they bring expensive gifts, but the text literally calls them "magos," the word that our English word "magician" comes from. In fact, the other place this word "magos" occurs in the New Testament is in Acts 8, when Simon the magician converts to Christianity. The magi from the east were most likely ancient astrologers who studied the night sky and dreams and prophecies for clues about life. Magi were deeply spiritual, but they were certainly not Jewish. In fact, in the eyes of faithful Jews, magi were living about as far outside the will of God as people could get. Magi were idolators; they looked to their own wisdom and to the stars rather than to God. On the playground of religion, they just didn't understand what God was all about.

And so we as readers are supposed to be shocked that God led *magi*, of all people, to the Christ child. We should be shocked that magi, total outsiders to the Jewish faith, had the sense that something world-shifting was being signaled by the star. The religious insiders – the chief priests and scribes in the story – were not the ones to bow down in worship of Christ; it was these pagan outsiders. The fact that God drew in these outsiders was unthinkable – it was almost embarrassing. It would be like God drawing in Miss Cleo from 1-900-4ZODIAC and having her be one of the first to worship the Christ child.

Clearly, in the story of the magi, God was pushing the boundaries. God was making it clear that everyone is fair game for the grace of God. No one is beyond God's reach. And it may even be that through outsiders "getting it," God will reveal this "blown-open" grace to the world.

This story pushes me. Epiphany pushes me. It challenges my small estimation of whom God can reach.

I remember when a good friend of ours I'll call Tom was dating a woman he met at a bar. Tom was a strong Christian, and his new girlfriend was not; in fact, I don't think she had any church background. She would tag along with Tom to worship and even to Bible Study, but I remember thinking that she just didn't seem very engaged in it all – I had a hunch that she was going through the motions in order to win points with him. After about six months, she and Tom broke up after finding that they just weren't compatible; besides, her company was transferring her to another city. I was relieved, for Tom's sake. But then I got a phone call from her (let's call her Sarah). She wanted to meet me for coffee because she had lots of questions about Christianity; she had read a book she found in the Christian section at Barnes and Noble, and evidently, some things had clicked for her. I tell you, we sat in Starbucks for a couple of hours, and I have never seen someone so animated in asking questions. It was as if the gospel had been a puzzle in her mind, and at this moment, all the pieces were coming together, and she was breathless at the beauty in the completed picture. I found myself feeling sad that Sarah was moving away – but she assured me that she had already been looking into churches in her new community.

Last week, Pastor Ken preached about the gospel needing to be verbally shared by us, God's people, for others to be able to see God at work in the world and in the church. Often, we will make excuses for *not* being evangelists like, "It's just not my gift," or "I don't know enough about Christianity – I might say something that's inaccurate," or "I don't want to be pushy and offend anyone." But I wonder if what inhibits us even before we get to the point of verbally sharing our faith with someone is a more deep-seated view that some people may simply be beyond God's reach. I like to think of myself as open and hopeful about people. I like to think of myself as someone who believes the gospel is powerful enough to transform anyone – but my initial indifference toward Sarah demonstrates otherwise. If I'm honest with myself, I realize that I am just as insider-focused as those who did not recognize the Messiah in Jesus Christ.

Who is beyond God's reach in your mind? Who is not worth bothering with the gospel? A wayward family member? A neighbor who keeps to himself? A friend's boyfriend or girlfriend who's nothing but a bad influence? A co-worker who happily practices another religion?

I think we all have people in our lives that seem too far outside – magi-types who probably wouldn't get it if they were told. But it is a good thing that God's grace doesn't originate with us. The spread of the gospel - evangelism - is *first* God's work. God is already at work moving in peoples' lives, drawing them out to a place of worship. By God's grace, *we* get to be included in that work sometimes.

I am always amazed at new member classes here at Hamblen to hear the stories of how people came to this church. Often, it is through the invitation of a friend or neighbor, someone who saw them as God sees them: as people included in the circle of God's grace, as people *worth inviting*. These evangelists among us are not necessarily long-time members. They are people who see themselves as blessed to have been included themselves, who don't have their lives together, who are still trying on this religious playground to understand what God is all about. Yet, God uses them. Those who have been bold to invite others in, those who have ever shared the gospel, the simple message of God's love for all, have gotten in on one of the most exciting parts of being a Christian.

As we stand at the beginning of a new year, may we, by the light of God's grace, see the outsiders in our lives as God sees us: as people worth including, worth inviting into relationship. And as we participate in God's work, may we start to understand more and more what God is all about.