

Sunday, January 3, 2016 – Epiphany (Transferred from January 6)
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 2:1-11

Wise Travelers

We call them wise, these travelers, the ones who are following a star. They were coming from the east -- perhaps they wore long, sage-like robes in an ancient eastern style, with a belt and maybe a hood... They were living in a time of an evil empire... There was a prophecy of a chosen one... They were looking for a new hope... They looked to the stars... which had a force, but there was also a dark side ... there were stars, there were wars... So many parts of the Bible have been extrapolated out—wisely, if you check the box office numbers from that movie blockbuster.

But back to the Bible: We call them wise, these travelers who appear, after Jesus was born. These travelers appear near the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew, chapter two—which is to say, they appear after the long genealogy, which takes up most of Matthew chapter 1. Matthew's gospel begins with a long family tree: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. That's how Matthew's gospel begins, with a history of the Hebrew people done name by name, with a genealogical sequence that leads up to Jesus. It's a long series of names. This person was the father of this person, who was the father of this person, who was the father of... You get the point, the point being, that Jesus comes from a particular, and significant, and Jewish strain. The genealogy of Matthew chapter one affirms Jesus' Jewish lineage. Jesus can be traced right back to David, Israel's greatest King, and before that, can be traced all the way back to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, the beginning of the line. Jesus appears in a line, straight from that, and then these travelers appear in chapter two, out of line. These travelers are from far outside of all of that. These are people who are not at all a part of that genealogy and history, but they come to see him, who is called the King of the Jews, to pay him homage—and we call them wise?

They travel from the East to the land of Jesus birth. They have been traveling a great distance, but they don't quite reach their destination, the place where Jesus was born, Bethlehem, they don't reach that city right away. Before arriving in Bethlehem, the travelers have to stop in Jerusalem and ask for directions. The questions make their way to Herod, King Herod, who is currently ruling over the Jewish people, but he rules by the appointment of Rome, the imperial oppressor of the Jewish people. Herod is a client king, a puppet ruler, and hugely unpopular with the people he rules, and with good reason—he is vicious, power-hungry, and crazy. These travelers from the East are summoned before him, Herod, who was widely feared, and roundly despised, and these travelers explain to King Herod that they are looking for the place where the new King is to born—and we call them wise?

These travelers make their way to the place where the baby Jesus is. They offer the infant gifts—strange gifts for a baby, not a rattle, nor an especially soft blanket, but a rather odd assortment: gold, frankincense and myrrh. These are their gifts for a newborn? (There is a sexist joke that says that's what happens when men are invited to a baby shower.) Sure, Mary and Joseph could probably do something with the gold (We should invite men to baby showers) but the other two gifts may have made the holy parents pause: the one, frankincense, is a rarefied religious implement, the other, myrrh, is the ancient equivalent of embalming fluid. You may

have gotten some strange gifts this Christmas, but they have nothing on the gifts that these travelers gave to Jesus. And we call them wise?

Not according to the Bible. The gospel writer Matthew never actually calls these travelers wise. In many Bibles, this is noted in a footnote, next to the word “wise men,” which the Bible notes is more accurately translated “astrologers, or “star gazers.” (These travelers would have loved the newest Star Wars movie.) “Wise men” is just the word that’s been used, for years and years, to describe this group of travelers. It’s the word we know—along with the number of people in their party. I’m sure you know that. How many were there? Three That’s another detail that’s not actually in the Biblical text, nor are their names... Does anyone know their names? Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior, though that’s not in the Bible, either. Maybe those were their names, maybe there were three of them—there were three gifts. Maybe they were men—though the Bible doesn’t tell us that, either. I’m wondering if they could have all been men... remember, when they had trouble arriving at their destination, they did stop and ask for directions...

There I go again, inserting a questionable interpretation, and probably a sexist one at that. So many parts of this Bible story have been inserted, added in—including the structure where the travelers finally arrive. In the common understanding, it’s the place where Jesus was born, when there was no room in the inn. And so it is that many a Christmas manger scene includes these three figurines. We have them, too, in our own lovely and recently restored set, back in the narthex. A common understanding is that it was at a stable that the wise men appear. Actually, in the gospel of Matthew, the manger isn’t mentioned at all. According to the Bible, when the travelers from the East appear, they arrive at a house.

So many things have been added, inserted into this story of these people we call wise. Maybe they weren’t so wise. Maybe all we have added to it isn’t so wise, either. But there’s wisdom in it, nonetheless. There’s wisdom in this story, even, ironically, in the way we add things to it. It is God’s wisdom. It is God’s wisdom, which adds things in. God adds the travelers in. God includes star gazers, strange-gift bearers, into the story of salvation. God’s wisdom adds people from far away, people outside the covenant with Israel. God adds them, because the newborn is King of all. Even before these travelers appeared, though, God was adding people in. In the covenantal line, the genealogy of Matthew chapter one, God’s wisdom adds outsiders in. The long list, the father of, the father of, the father of, includes surprising additions: people who are not Jewish, people who act out of line, people who are women: Tamar, Rahab, Bathsheba, Ruth. They, too, appear in the lineage of the birth of Jesus. And then, when Jesus grew up, he traveled across Jewish land, and lands to its east, as well. Jesus appears with outsiders: women from Syrophenicia and Cana and Samaria; a Roman Centurion, whose servant Jesus healed, 4,000 Gentiles whom Jesus fed. And then, at the very end of Matthew’s gospel, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Jesus gave his first followers—at that point, all Jews—these instructions, “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...”

All of us, no matter whether we came from the east or the west, whether or travels to get here were long or short or included stopping for directions, no matter our lineage, all of us have been added in by God. All you who are looking for hope, all you star gazers, all you who wonder at your place in the universe, all have been added at the manger. So bring your gifts, however strange they are, God will use them wisely. They will be fitting, here, as were the gifts of those travelers: gold for a King, incense for a God, myrrh for a mortal. Jesus, the Christ, the divine-human one, who saves all. You, too, have been added in, so bring your gifts, and pay him homage.