

January 6, 2019 – Epiphany of Our Lord
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 2:1-12

Showing Up in Person

The wise men are at the manger. Today in our stable scene at the back of church there are three wise men figurines, and a camel, there amidst the shepherds and sheep. You can find wise men in many nativity scenes: outdoors on people's lawns, in smaller sets on mantelpieces, in nativity paintings or tapestries or Christmas cards you will often see wise men, at the stable, their fine robes a contrast with the straw.

This doesn't make much sense, biblically, putting wise men at the manger. It does not follow how the story goes in the gospels. Instead, it's of a mash-up of two different gospels and how they describe the birth of Jesus. There's the gospel of Luke—that's the one that's always read on Christmas Eve, the one with "no room in the inn" and the "shepherds, out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." And then there's the gospel of Matthew, and how it describes the birth of Jesus. We heard Matthew's nativity story last Sunday, and it continues in the gospel reading today. Matthew has different things to say about the birth of Jesus than Luke does—this is not to say they contradict each other; both identify the pivotal, parental roles of Mary and Joseph, and both note that Bethlehem, the city of David, was the place where Jesus was born. But there are some differences, things mentioned in one gospel and not in another. Unlike Luke, Matthew does not mention shepherds, or a manger as a cradle, but Matthew does mention a group of visitors whom Luke does not, wise men from the east, the story that is read today, on Epiphany. That story is only in Matthew. As we just heard read, the wise men do not find the holy family in a stable. Matthew says the wise men followed a star to "the place where they were" and then clarifies, "on entering the house they offered gifts." No manger, no stable—a house.

We would or should assume that after Jesus' birth, after that midnight clear, after that holy night, that glorious and exhausting experience in that humblest of delivery rooms, at some point after that Joseph and Mary found a more comfortable place to stay, to rest, to recover, to learn what it meant to be a family. Those are holy nights too, those nights and days just after a baby is born, as you get to know one another, as you get to know what it is to be a mother, to be a father, to care for this miracle from God. That's what Mary and Joseph were doing when the wise men appeared, it was some days after Jesus was born, we don't know how many, but the shepherds were long gone. Luke's gospel actually makes a point of that, of the shepherd's swift arrival and departure on the night of Jesus' birth. They went with haste, and after seeing the child, "the shepherds returned, praising God and telling all that they had seen." The shepherds might not be called wise, but they knew not to overstay a visit with brand new parents.

So it was some time after Jesus' birthday, perhaps twelve days after—January 6th is exactly twelve days after Christmas, Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas—perhaps it was twelve days after Jesus' birth that the wise men arrived. Or maybe they arrived yet more days later, months later, maybe more than a year later. Such is the inference if you continue reading Matthew's birth narrative, where Herod continues to be mentioned, where Herod continues—and terribly intensifies—his efforts at eliminating any rival to power. It's not just newborns that have Herod worried. If you follow the narrative of Matthew's gospel, the only one mentions the wise men, when they finally arrived Jesus may have been two years old. At that point, he might not

have fit in a manger, and certainly could have crawled right out of it. Undoubtedly, there's some combining and contracting happening when placing wise men next to an infant Jesus in the hay. A strict biblical literalist would demand that they not be there: no wise men at the manger, and especially no camel—you won't find a camel in the gospels until a needle needs threading. Our papier-mâché friend on wheels could have been saved the trip.

So yes, we could get rid of wise men at the manger, and justify it, scripturally—but in doing so we might miss a larger point, a theological point, that is Christmas at its core. I'm going to get to this point, but first I want to point out what this sermon is attempting to do. All this examining of details and questioning what they mean is actually towards this point, it's an attempt to model how Lutheran Christians read the Bible. This is how Lutheran Christians read the Bible: carefully, comparatively, thoughtfully, critically, lovingly, devotionally—all of these, and all of these with this purpose: to see what God is doing in Christ. That's how Lutheran Christians read the Bible, not as a scientific textbook or historical tape recorder, not as a collection of rules that are designed to make you feel bad, not as a promise of pie in the sky in the sweet by and by so don't bother with the world as it is or with others. Those are all ways some people read the Bible, but not Lutheran Christians, not when we approach scripture according to our core value. When we do that we read it asking: how does it reveal Christ? This, after all, is what Epiphany is, and celebrates, the revelation, the manifestation, of Christ. What do wise men coming to see the Christ child tell us about what God is doing in Christ?

It turns out that there is in fact a wisdom, perhaps inadvertent, to any plastic lawn set that includes wise men. You should think of this when see them, or as you admire the figurines in the at the back of our church today, or any sets you may have. There is a statement that is made by having wise men at the manger—even more so when they are living and breathing wise men, like the Confirmation students who enacted the gospel, our living and breathing wise people. Our students with their sneakers peeking out of royal robes may be just as anachronistic as a manger with wise men figurines, but they both offer a theological echo of what Christmas is about: because they are there in person. They make the trip. They get themselves there. They are physically present.

At Christmas, God comes in person. God gets God's self here. God makes the trip, from heaven to earth. God becomes physically present. At Christmas, God makes a statement, makes a difference, by showing up in person, by showing up in a child, a baby, Jesus. And then when Jesus grows up he will continue to make a statement, make a difference, with where he shows up: eating with tax collectors and sinners, blessing children and cradling them in his arms, attending banquets and making sure there's enough wine, standing outside of tombs and weeping. It makes a statement, it makes a difference, when people show up in person: when they come to the wedding, to the banquet, to the graduation, when they come to celebrate with you. It makes a difference when they come to mourn with you. So many times I have heard grieving people tell me how much it meant to them that these people came to the funeral. It makes a difference when you come here, to church, it makes a statement, to your children, to your parents, to others gathered here. It makes a statement to the world. It makes a difference in your heart, when you show up in person, here. It makes your heart a manger, where Christ may be found. It makes you a living scripture, for all to read and see Christ revealed.