

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

*⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”*

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Epiphany Shows How the Gospel Always Strikes the Heart

Tomorrow, January 6th is the festival of Epiphany. If you lived in Latin America or Europe, there would be all kinds of traditions that go with that day. You’d probably know it better as “Three Kings Day.” There might be a procession through town with people in costumes, giving treats to children or kids might knock on your door looking for treats, like they do here on Halloween. We don’t do any of those things in this country. That doesn’t bother me too much simply because the men who came were not kings. The Bible calls them *magi* which means they were religious scholars, probably from Persia or Parthia. That means, of course, that they were not Jewish. The Wise Men were the first Gentiles who believed in Jesus. Epiphany is the celebration of Jesus coming not just for one tiny country or people. He is the Savior of the world. Why did those Magi come? In the end, for the same reason we have come here today: to worship their Savior. In the twelve verses Matthew records for us this morning, we see how these men responded to the gospel. But they’re not the only people in this account. Herod gives us the chance to see a different reaction to the message about Jesus. But **Epiphany shows how the gospel always strikes the heart.**

I.

It creates faith by God’s power. That’s what we see in the Wise Men. They came to Jerusalem and asked, **“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”** Why did they go to Jerusalem? Jerusalem was the capital and that’s where you would expect to find someone who was born as a king. But weren’t they following the star? Why didn’t it lead them straight to Bethlehem? Later, when they left Jerusalem, Matthew says that the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. But then he says, **“When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.”** Why be overjoyed? It seems like the star had disappeared some time before they reached Israel, so they went to the capital. Only when they left Jerusalem did that star reappear.

But how did they know to look for the king of the Jews? How did they know to look for a baby? How did a star communicate to them that this child had been born? I can’t really answer those questions. In the end, all we can say is that these foreign scholars had heard the good news that God was going to send a Savior to be born to the Jewish people, that he would be the king of the Jews, and then that God sent this star and he somehow revealed to these men what the star meant.

The important thing is how these men reacted to the news: they believed it. And they traveled a great distance to worship that child. Their reaction shows God's power. He reaches into hearts that don't believe and he creates faith there. Now, sometimes it happens instantly. Someone hears the gospel and God opens their heart and they know and trust their Savior. But more often, even in the Bible, God lays groundwork through the gospel until that moment comes when God does the miracle and gives faith. Either way, that miracle is what we can take away from the Wise Men. We have no idea how much gospel they actually knew. We don't know if they had the Old Testament or not. We don't know how clearly they understood Old Testament prophecy even if they did. We don't know if God appeared to them in some special way like he did at the end of this account when he warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. And we don't know how well they understood what the one born king of the Jews was really going to do – did they know he would die and then rise? But God gave them the gospel and he gave them faith – however limited and imperfect it might have been. That faith drove them to travel unknown miles and lay extraordinary treasures at Jesus' feet.

Do you see the connection to us? You don't have to know everything to get to heaven. But you do need that miracle of faith. It doesn't matter how or when God gives it. Most of us probably came to faith when we were baptized as babies. But there may have been other ways that the gospel came to some of us. It may not have happened all at once. When I was vicar, a friend of mine asked me to visit his grandfather who was dying – and who was an unbeliever. On my first visit, I baptized him. But I wasn't the first person to share the gospel with him. I can't know how long the message was working on his heart before I got there.

God does a miracle when he brings us to faith and he always does it through the gospel. But it's a mystery how he enters a sinful heart and makes it his. But the mystery itself is actually comforting for us. My experience doesn't have to match yours. There is no template we have to follow to get to Jesus – which is something too many Christians don't understand. A whole branch of the Christian church tries to lay out a path through personal crisis and flooding your couch with tears and then you invite Jesus into your heart. But none of that is required in the Bible. God comes to us sinners in the gospel and he works. There is no effort on our part that makes it happen. There is no right or wrong procedure we have to go through to make it to faith. God comes at the moment he chooses – always through the gospel – and he makes us his.

That miracle is the answer to all that's wrong with this life. It's the answer to all the guilt we feel for all our sins and failures. That guilt says that we have sinned. But the gospel says that Jesus paid for our sins and we are forgiven. God works faith in our hearts through that message and we know those sins are gone. God's working is also the answer to fear and anxiety. God says that he is with us, that Jesus has defeated death and hell and even the devil and no matter what happens to us here, we will live with him forever. And he will do all things for our good. God's work is the answer to sadness and loss here. He says that he will give us the strength to face each day of hurt and sorrow here. He promises to heal us, even in this life with his unmatched love for us. He promises to bring us home to heaven where nothing will ever hurt again. God's power in the gospel is the answer to conflict and poverty and loneliness. He works through the gospel to give strength as we face all those things. Jesus destroyed the source of all those things when he died and rose and took all our sins away. He will give us relief here and free us totally from all those things in the life to come.

The list could go on and on. But those first Gentiles to worship their Savior show us the mystery of the gospel. God works. He finds us with his message. He reaches into our sinful and rebellious hearts and he gives us faith. And we don't do anything to make that happen. Faith is a gift God gives us. Even though all of us have an imperfect faith in this life, even though all of us will have questions for as long as we live in this sinful world, even though all of us need to grow in our faith every day that we are here and we will all die long before we ever could reach perfection in our faith, that trust in Christ brings us home to heaven. Even a mustard seed of faith does that.

II.

The crucial path to faith in Jesus is through the gospel. **Epiphany shows how the gospel always strikes the heart. It strikes the heart even when people don't believe it.** That's what you see in the astounding actions of King Herod. Herod was a pretty typical tyrant. He was put in power by the Romans, but he spent most of his career expanding the territory he ruled by war and by other means. He was paranoid about his position. Over the course of his rule, he executed his favorite wife and several of his sons because they became threats. So it's not surprising that he was disturbed when the Wise Men announced that they were

looking for the one who had been born king of the Jews. And it's not surprising the Jerusalem was disturbed, too. Who knew what the king would do?

None of that was unique to the gospel. But the first thing Herod did was call in the religious leaders of Israel and ask them where the Christ was to be born. He understood that the king the Wise Men were looking for had to be a descendant of King David, even though no king from that line had reigned for more than five hundred years. He understood that the promised King of Israel was the Christ – that is the promised Messiah. He even understood that God had made specific promises about that king's coming. And Herod took those prophecies seriously. He sent the Wise Men to Bethlehem to find the child so that he could deal with him. And last week, we heard what happened when the Wise Men didn't come back: Herod slaughtered the babies of Bethlehem, because he believed the prophecy.

What can we say about this man? He didn't understand the gospel correctly. Like almost everyone in Israel, he thought of the coming Messiah as an earthly king. But on some level, he knew that it was true. His heart reacted with fear and violence and deceit. Think of the gall of a man who believed that a five-hundred-year-old prophecy given by God had been just been fulfilled, and his reaction was to try and murder the king God sent. What does that tell us about Herod?

He was hardened in his unbelief. He rejected the Savior that God had sent and he became hostile. The gospel never leaves a heart untouched. When a believer hears the gospel, his or her faith is strengthened and educated. But when an unbeliever hears the gospel, either that person becomes a believer, or that person rejects the message and hardens his or her heart against it. Now, the truth is, we all resist the gospel at first and are hardened. But God is still God. He still brings us to faith. But when that hardening becomes permanent, that person becomes a ferocious enemy of the gospel. That's what Herod became. But even that hardening demonstrates the power of the gospel. You can't just shrug it off. It touches your heart, even if the effect is so subtle that you don't realize it. But you have to react to it either by believing or fighting against it. If you become a determined enemy of the gospel, the lengths that your hatred of that message will drive you to are astounding. Herod shows us that reality.

Left to ourselves, we would all react the way that Herod did. Before we believed, we were just as committed to resisting the gospel as Herod was. But God did a miracle. He gave us faith. There is an incredible mystery here: the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and he gives faith where and when he wills it. And we simply cannot answer the question why some people believe and others don't. The Bible tells us that God is all powerful and he works this miracle so he alone gets the credit for our faith. The Bible tells us God wants all people to have that faith, so he does not predestine some people to be unbelievers. The Bible tells us that when a person rejects the gospel, that's all his or her own fault. There is a mystery here that we cannot understand. But Herod shows us that even an unbeliever is changed by the gospel because it is the power of God. How much greater is the change God worked in us?

Rather than torture ourselves with questions we can't answer, Epiphany reminds us of the mystery and the miracle of God's love. He chose us even though we are strangers and foreigners to the people of God. He worked in his own mysterious way to bring the gospel to each one of us at the moment he chose and he gave us faith. Now we are his children. We will live with him forever. No matter how much we struggle in our faith here, no matter how many crosses we bear in this life, no matter how much it hurts or how hard God's will is to understand, those Wise Men who came from distant lands to kneel before their Savior show us how much God has done to make us believers. America is a lot farther away from Bethlehem than Persia. But God got that gospel message to us. Now, we are his. Forever. Amen.