

## **WELCOME 7 January 2018 Epiphany '18 B**

Matthew 2:1-12

Good morning! Welcome to worship today! It is great to have you here this morning. Please stay for morning tea after worship so we can get a chance to know one another better...

Jesus...Believers revere him as the Son of God.

Artists have cast him in images that reflect their own time & place. Many to reflect their own bias or belief.

Skeptics dismiss him as legend.

But Who is Jesus? The One prophets foretold & magi travelled vast distances to search for. The One people still search for & are drawn to today.

In an age where many are walking away from the Church, & alternate belief systems are as common as fleas on a dog...the Bible's consistent witness to the mystery of who Jesus is, is found among his people who are called by grace to be the sign, promise, and embodiment of God's purpose & plan for the world.

Namely, that in Christ, God the Father reaches to the farthest expanse of his world to bring his human creation close to his heart. In Christ, there is no longer insiders/outsideers, but all people shall be one. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace.

Jesus Christ - the light of the nations, the hope of the world, the Saviour who comes for all.

We'll explore & experience that together today!

LWKids is on holidays & will restart around the beginning of the school year.

If you'd like to be part of that team leading our kids...see me today!

### **PRAYER OF THE DAY**

*The God who breathed this world alive And sustains it day by day  
Whose hands flung stars into space And controls our destiny  
Says, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."*

*The God who filled the ocean depths And set tides on their way  
Who caused mountains to be raised up And rainbows to display  
Says, "I have called you by name, you are mine."*

*The God who made the fertile earth And seed within to sow  
Whose artistry creates butterflies And the early morning dew  
Says, "You are precious in my sight."*

*Father You have loved us from before we were conceived, and your love has brought us to this place today. Bless us in our time together, our worship, in the understanding of your word and in our going out into the world. Through our words and draw others into the arms of your love, so the whole world begins to sing your praises. Through Jesus Christ...Amen*

## Epiphany '18 B – WHO IS JESUS? THE ONE WHO COMES FOR ALL

- FAITH CHAT:**
1. How did you welcome 2018? Why that way? Different/Same as previous years?
  2. How does your life reflect who Jesus is to you?

In any vocational field, we expect those who pursue that vocation to know what they are doing. And we expect they will have a fairly deep/wide knowledge of things related to their vocation. We just spent a few days with my brother/sister-in-law. They are farmers. Over the 28 years Leonie & I have been married I've seen him demonstrate his knowledge in vast depth/breadth: seeds, soils, chemistry, weather, construction, animal science...exactly what I expect of folks in professional vocations. My healthcare providers all do what they do with incredible skill & breadth of knowledge not only in medicine but chemistry, physiology, anatomy, biology AND US politics, ethics & faith... exactly what I expect of folks in professional vocations. I had a legal question awhile back...I called a funeral director & he was spot on with his insight & advice...exactly what I expect of folks in professional vocations.

Having said that...I hope you aren't disappointed today...Because what I know for sure about the magi is precisely...nothing...well not exactly nothing; but pretty close to it. In all seriousness. They show up in the gospel account in Mt 2:1 & are gone by vs 12. How many of them were there? Tradition says 3...but that's because there were 3 gifts listed by Matthew. Look...when Leonie & I got married we received about 9 sets of placemats & at least 3 toasters...So just counting the variety of gifts tells us nothing. There is an old tradition says there were 12...tribes of Israel Names? Caspar, Melchior & Balthazar seem to float around in church history, but those names emerged only in the 600s...1400 yrs ago.

From where did they come? The East. Is that Forest Hill? Our best scholarly guess is that they were probably advisers to some king of a Persian/Arab nation-state ...maybe. Asia/India? We just don't know. We always seem to see one of them pictured as African for whatever that tells us. (Ouyen whopping big display life-sized) When? Nativity scenes almost always have the 3 magi sitting around the manger along w/ the shepherds. Two problems there: 1 – they didn't arrived until some time AFTER Mary/Joseph had found more permanent lodging...Matthew says, "they entered the house" 2 – given the nature of their capability to give expensive gifts they wouldn't have travelled alone. They would have had a caravan to support their 16-1800 kilometre journey which would have included some armed escorts. Scholars say maybe 300-400 people so when they reach Jerusalem they would have caused quite a commotion. Imagine the pomp/circumstance/kerfuffle accompanying a 300-400 person armed convoy on some cosmic kingly search ultimately being granted an audience w/ King Herod.

Oh...the star? Depending on which Biblical scholars you ask, it is either a regular star, supernatural phenomenon, comet, or a once-in-a-million-years grouping of planets that was so bright they could even follow it during the day. We don't know.

Well...that's great John...but what do you know?

Well..."Magi" is a Persian word that designated a special class of educated mystics. These were the sorts of guys Pharaoh used to try to undo the plagues God sent upon Egypt through Moses. They are the men we see in Daniel who can't figure out anything until Daniel explains it to them. They are the academic/political advisers to royal families well-schooled in history, medicine, maths, world religion, prophecy, astronomy (the study of the stars/planets & their alignments, movements, configurations) & astrology (the belief that those stars/planets & their alignments, movements, configurations can influence life here on earth). Magi is also the base word from which we get "magician." They believed in/believed you could manipulate the forces/powers of the universe to bend circumstances favourably your way.

Don't miss this: They were decidedly NOT JEWISH. They were PAGAN. Trained in & raised in pagan culture. They were masters of the pagan spiritual smorgasbord. They acknowledged not one God but many expressions of gods. They may have been familiar with Judaism only because God's people had been exiled to Babylon & the accounts of Daniel's time there told through the histories of the Medes/Persians who took over the world stage by defeating/overthrowing Babylon. But here they are in Jerusalem having trekked some 16-1800 kilometres looking for the "newborn King of the Jews." They knew a child had been born. They knew he was a king. They did not know his name or where to narrow their search. So here they are in Jerusalem in the place where any king of the Jews should be. There is a delightful naiveté about their search because they seem to assume that everyone there will both know about & be excited about what they have somehow discerned from their astronomical & astrological explorations.

But by now, history tells us, Herod is clinging to his throne with a faltering grip. He is an old man who has killed most of his natural successors including at least 1 wife. His health is fading - his brutality is growing. He's not a Jew & is "king of the Jews" only because he happened to have the right friends in the Roman Senate when the position became vacant...Newborn king? He has no idea. So he summons the priests & the scribes who don't have to think twice...they know the promises of God & the prophecies of Micah...they point straight to Bethlehem.

So the pagan magi are dispatched to go find this child they desire to worship...BUT the Jewish scribes/priests do what? Go back to sleep it seems. Those who should have known & should have gone to see if these travellers had it right & should have packed their worship gear for the 10K trip down to Bethlehem did none of that. God's people failed to act on the truth they possessed. We know what Herod did. He started organizing a slaughter...an infanticide. He may not have unleashed his soldiers until he found out he'd been tricked, but "*all Jerusalem*" knew what Herod did to those who had designs on his kingship. He knew he sat on a shaky throne & there was always someone waiting to kick the legs out from under him.

Among all that I don't know...& the few things we can figure out...these pagan travellers teach me two things: In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace. In Christ, God the Father reaches to the farthest expanse of his world to bring his human creation close to his heart. These pagan mystics are drawn to Christ by the Father & somehow the Magi see beyond the present into the future & in deep faith worship him *Ps 86:9 - All the nations you made will come & bow before you, Lord; they will praise your holy name.* They recognized in this child someone who called to their hearts & were not ashamed to fall on their faces before him.

Look...God's greatest passion is to make his love real in human hearts, so that in turn, human hearts will live from that love in every relationship/direction/dimension. That is the overarching agenda of God. His Kingdom, which comes in Christ & comes in fullness when Christ returns is a Kingdom of love, joy peace & righteousness in the Holy Spirit. (Rom 14:17). The Father sends His Son to a world that's surely lost... broken to death in its own sin...distant from the truth alienated from his grace so that the Father's love can be poured out in rivers of blood from his Son crucified for us.

We know what happens from here on: Jesus eats with outcasts & sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick, engages & frees those who are demon-possessed & even calls the dead back to life. From a manger, where Jesus lies swaddled in cloth bands, God's reach/God's embrace in Christ Jesus, gets wider/wider/wider. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. (Jn 12:32) What can exclude you from that love? Nothing. What can banish you from the heart of the Father? Nothing. What distance is so great that the Christ's arms can't enfold you? None. You are not too messed up/too dirty/too guilty/too old/too small/too insignificant/too far off from what God wants. God sought out these pagan star-gazers & in their search for truth & meaning God caught their hearts for his own purposes & plans...That child is for you & your friends & your family & your co-workers & your neighbours & the folks you play cards with & the people you eat lunch with the service club the shed...

But there's something else here...Light always causes a reaction. Herod glimpsed it & tried to snuff it out. The scribes & priests spotted it & turned away. The Magi like moths to a flame followed it to the source & discovered joy beyond their wildest dreams.

Oswald Chambers asks a hard question of folks like us: "How many people have you made homesick for God?" Paul says it differently...but the point is the same: *Do everything without complaining or arguing. Then you will be blameless & innocent. You will be God's children without any faults among people who are crooked & corrupt. You will shine like stars among them in the world as you hold firmly to the word of life.*

God intends for his church to be a star of Bethlehem in this crooked & depraved generation. I don't have to tell you... people are into all kinds of spiritual hogwash. But all that hogwash points to a deep deep longing. They know there must be more than this life & they're looking everywhere. They open the papers & read their horoscope/psychics/mystics. They flood the self-help section at the bookstore. They grasp at every straw from every new age old eastern folklore...they meditate & get mindfull & ring bells & bang brass bowls...there's a hunger there & we are to be light. We're to be this light shining in the dark place, that when people see us they find Jesus as we hold out the word of life & shine like stars...Sometimes we despair of seeing our friends come to Christ because nothing we say seems to have the slightest effect on them. These magi ought to give us great hope. God is infinitely creative in the things he can use to break through to people who seem to be so far from him...and Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would move in ways we would never predict or expect...even in us.

In Christ, God the Father reaches to the farthest expanse of his world to bring his human creation close to his heart. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God's embrace.

Jesus Christ - the light of the nations, the hope of the world, is the Saviour who comes for all. And all who are drawn to him, he makes radiant in his love so they then become light for the world.

Let's pray...**Heavenly Father, you spoke your word and revealed your good news in Jesus Christ. By your Spirit speak to our hearts again today so that we boldly proclaim your joyful promises to all nations and sing of your glorious hope to all people. Reveal to us more fully who Jesus is, that we may live generously, love expansively, speak confidently and act courageously each day; drawing more to worship you as their King. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.**