

January 6, 2019—The Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord

Out of all the people, in all the world, they had to be some of the most unexpected. Foreigners, from across the world, from a land of darkness and unbelief. They were some of the people you'd least expect...until they saw it. And then everything changed.

They've been called by many different names. "Wise Men." "Magi." "The Three Kings." The Evangelist Matthew writes, ***"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem."*** Everyone knows about them, but there is so much we don't know about them! Who exactly were these mysterious men?

We can't say for sure what these Magi did. They may have been religious priests, or practitioners of sorcery and divination. They may have been wise advisers. They may have been astronomers or astrologers, hired by kings to stare at the stars and find meaning and signs. We don't know for sure, because God doesn't tell us. But because God forbade some of the practices of Eastern Magi, Jews would have viewed them with a negative stigma. You might paraphrase Matthew's words in Greek, "Can you believe *Magi* came to visit Jesus?" These were unexpected people!

And yet, Matthew spends 12 verses of his gospel on the Magi, and only a ½ verse on the birth of Jesus! In fact, Matthew is the only gospel that records the Magi's visit. Matthew wrote to a Jewish audience, for two reasons: To convince them that Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament prophecies; and to show that Jesus came as the Savior not just of Israel, but of all people! So Matthew spills plenty of ink about these unexpected, mysterious Gentiles.

One evening, as the Magi looked up at the sky, they noticed a star they hadn't seen before had appeared! It reminded them of an ancient Jewish prophecy about a rising star signaling the birth of the King of the Jews.

How exactly did these Gentiles know ancient Jewish prophecies? We can't say for sure, because God doesn't tell us, but these Magi were likely from Persia or Babylon. And we do know that Jewish exiles, like Daniel and his friends, were carried off to Babylon, as well as Israelites who were exiled throughout the lands of the Medes and the Persians. So most likely, displaced Jews had shared prophecies about the promised Messiah with the people in their new lands; like from the book of Numbers, ***"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."***

We can't say for sure how the Magi connected this star with the King of the Jews. God doesn't tell us. But what's important is that the Magi trusted that this star meant the king had been born. So they packed up, and traveled nearly 1,000 miles over rugged desert, to find him. For perspective, that would be like trekking from Appleton to New Orleans!

We usually picture the Magi following the star the whole journey, like an ancient GPS. But most likely, they saw the star appear, believed the king of the Jews had been born, then traveled to Jerusalem, assuming a king would be born in the capitol city. That's where they'd expect the king to be, but the king they sought was an unexpected King.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they began inquiring, ***"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"*** No one seemed to know, but word of these foreigners' strange question quickly spread, eventually all the way to the man who liked being called, "King of the Jews." And he was shaken.

His name was King Herod, or Herod the Great. He was the kind of king you'd expect for his day. He was "the Great" because of master building projects he oversaw, including his massive expansion of Jerusalem's Temple. But he was also great at ruthlessly crushing any challengers to his throne. He said to have murdered his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, and brother-in-law. And so, as rumor spread about a new "King of the Jews," all of Jerusalem grew nervous about what their bloodthirsty King might do.

Herod had heard about the Jews long awaited Messiah, but he didn't know anything about the Christ. So he **"called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Christ was to be born."**

Well-versed in the Old Testament, these religious experts immediately answered, **"In Bethlehem in Judea."** They knew Micah's prophecy, made 700 years earlier, by heart. **"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."**

The murderous Herod forms a plot, sending the Magi off to Bethlehem to find the child, so he could eventually exterminate this threat. But what's a little unexpected, is that no one joins these Gentile Magi for the 6-mile journey to Bethlehem. The Chief Priests and teachers of the law, who just moments before had said the long-awaited Christ would be born in Bethlehem, don't move a muscle. They had all kinds of knowledge, they just weren't wise enough to believe it.

Which character do you most closely resemble in this account? Are you the Magi, so trusting and relentless in your pursuit to worship Christ? Or are you sometimes more like Herod? Power-hungry; refusing to let even God have a say on how you should live? Willing to get rid of Christ, so you can still reign supreme over your life? Or are you more like the Jewish religious leaders? Able to recite Bible passages by heart, but unwilling to take them to heart or put them into practice? Knowing exactly what God says, but failing to trust it? Unwilling to go even 6 miles to worship your King? Sadly, far too often, we resemble the men we'd expect to be first to worship their King, but aren't even in line.

But at the same time, we also closely resemble the Magi. Here's why. We often call them "Wise Men," because many think they were the most educated scholars of their day, cream of the crop intellectuals. The danger in that though, is thinking that the Magi's journey to find the "one who had been born King of the Jews," was the result of their own wisdom; that it was their wisdom that led them to seek out Christ!

But think about it. Everything that brought them on that path to Bethlehem, was revealed to them by God. The star in the sky—put there by God. The knowledge of ancient Jewish prophecy—made known to their forefathers by God's people. Malachi's prophecy that the child would be born in Bethlehem—revealed by God's Word. It was God who led the Magi to Jesus, and it was God who gave them the faith to trust that he was their king too.

On their way to Bethlehem, God once again takes action. Miraculously, **"the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was."** This wasn't some cosmic coincidence. This was God, leading these unexpected Gentile followers to meet the Light of All Nations!

Having just stood in Herod's magnificent palace in Jerusalem, they now stand before a modest family, in a modest house, in modest Bethlehem. Having just stood before a king who ruthlessly murdered to defend his throne, they now stand before a king whose only defense was his Virgin mother and carpenter father. A king not bent on power and authority at all costs, but a king who came to **"be the shepherd of...Israel,"** and of all nations, at all the cost... of himself.

Standing before their unexpected king, the Magi don't throw up their hands, angry that they'd been duped. Rather, they throw themselves down and worship the child Jesus, and present him with treasure chests full of valuable gold, frankincense, and myrrh. An unexpected King, revealed to unexpected people.

There are lots of unanswered questions about this account. Where were the Magi from? What did they do? How long did their journey take? How old was Jesus when they arrived? How many Magi were there? What were their names? What did they look like? We don't know. God doesn't tell us.

And I think God doesn't tell us, because the answers would just distract from what's really important. When all of those extraneous details are stripped away, what remains is what matters: Gentile sinners, led by God, saying of Jesus, ***"We have come to worship him."*** An unexpected King, revealed to unexpected people.

That's why I said earlier that we also resemble the Magi. Not because of our great wisdom, or valiant efforts, or valuable treasures. No, like the Magi, we're Gentile sinners, completely undeserving, and completely unexpected recipients of God's grace. Not revealing Christ with a star, but with his powerful Word, with the waters of our baptisms, and by the body and blood of our Savior King, so we too have come to worship him!

Can I share something really unexpected with you? The people I referenced in the first paragraph of this sermon? The people who were some of the most unexpected. Foreigners, from a land that hardly lent itself to an understanding of the truth. I wasn't talking about the Magi. I was talking about the Hmong Fellowship Church in Vietnam.

It wasn't seeing a star that changed everything for them, but an online sermon. A church body of 55,000 Vietnamese Hmong, led by untrained pastors who taught their congregations that they had to perform man-made rules to earn Heaven. Until one pastor, Zang Lou, stumbled upon a sermon by Hmong WELS pastor Bounkeo Lor. He was so moved by the sweet gospel of Jesus, that he invited Pastor Lor to come to Vietnam and teach 60 church leaders the truth of God's Word.

8 years later, the Hmong Fellowship Church, now comprised of 100,000 Vietnamese Hmong, in spite of persecution, desires to become a confessional Lutheran church body. What's even more unexpected? The communist Vietnamese government has seen so much positive change in these people, that they've exclusively invited the WELS to come and build a theological training facility in Hanoi, where 350 pastors, and 2,500 church leaders will receive training to take the good news of salvation by grace, through faith in Christ, to 2 million Hmong people in Vietnam and surrounding countries. 44 years after the Vietnam War, and here we are. God continues to reveal the unexpected King to unexpected people. Here at home, and to all nations.