

Did you realize there really are twelve days of Christmas? Including Christmas Day itself, twelve days have passed, and now we find ourselves at the day of Epiphany, which, for once, actually falls on a Sunday. Do you know what the day of Epiphany is all about? On this day we remember the visit of the Wise Men to baby Jesus, and everything surrounding it: the star; the gifts; King Herod's reaction; these things are sometimes associated with Christmas, but the church calendar delays a close look at the Wise Men (or Magi) until now; Epiphany. This is because Matthew says their visit took place "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem" and that they found Jesus and Mary in a house, rather than a stable, implying that some time had passed since his birth and a room had opened up somewhere.

See, that's the thing with the Magi. When you start looking into their story, you learn some fascinating stuff, but you also end up with more questions than answers. There are many things about them that are downright mysterious. Such as: Matthew—the only gospel writer to report this incident—doesn't tell us exactly *where* these men were from (just the east); he doesn't say how many of them there were (I know tradition says three, but the only group of three in the text are the gifts); and as far as why they came, all we have are their own words: "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Now, these men saw a lot of stars—they were astronomers and astrologers, after all—but there was something about this star that did more than pique their interest. It compelled them to go and investigate and participate for the purpose of worship, and the word used for 'worship' means "to move towards someone in order to kiss them." Do you see how unusual this really is? These learned scholars from an entirely different culture show up in Jerusalem looking to lavish gifts (and maybe a few kisses) upon an incredibly important newborn baby. Like many things, we may be so used to the story that we've lost the wonder of it. Even though prophets like Isaiah had said something like this was going to happen, there's still a sense of surprise when it does; can you imagine Mary's reaction? "Can we come in? We'd like to worship your son. We've brought gifts."

There are many elements of the visit of the Magi that we would have to classify as unexplained. But from a wide-angle view, there is a definite point to their arrival. Wherever they were from in "the east" (most commentaries would tell you Persia or Babylon), one thing is for certain. These were non-Israelites. To use the biblical term, they were Gentiles. Yet they came to worship Jesus, and—don't miss this part—they and their worship were accepted. The Magi—foreign in every meaningful way to the people and culture of Israel—came to kiss the baby Jesus and found exceedingly great joy. They were the first in a line of Gentile worshippers that continues down to this present day, and it's that very idea of opening up; of unfolding; of including, that gives Epiphany its special quality. Epiphany says "Jesus is for you, no matter who you are." This is beautiful, wonderful news, but it's not always easy to process.

For example, look at the way the apostle Paul talks about it in his letter to the Ephesians. He keeps referring to a mystery—a mystery that has been revealed to Him—a mystery that only now in the New Testament era is being fully opened up. Paul calls it "the mystery of Christ," and

he defines it clearly in verse 6 of chapter 3: “This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” Now be honest—were you astonished when you heard those words? If not, you should’ve been, but, I doubt that we could be more astonished than the man who wrote these words in the first place. The man who wrote these words, who had formerly been known as Saul, was steeped in Old Testament tradition and, even more to the point, had been born an Israelite. He was extremely well versed in the ceremonial laws, not to mention the temple sacrifices and its customs. Simply put, he had grown up knowing he was one of God’s Chosen People, yet—and this is a huge yet—there was something he did not understand...something he could not understand until it was revealed to him...until God unfolded it himself and showed it to Saul. And that something is that there was “a way in” for Gentiles to enjoy all the same blessings, and that “way in” is the gospel of Jesus.

Here is someone, in Paul, who could’ve argued with God, and said this was unfair, or refused to participate because ‘what have the Gentiles ever done to deserve it?’ But instead he wrote, “To me this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” To Paul, it was a mystery that God would make Gentiles fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise, but it was a mystery he celebrated! He considered it a gift of grace to be sent to Gentiles with the news of Jesus. This kind of wholesale change and acceptance of something completely new was (and is) only possible when a person has experienced the full impact of the gospel of Jesus—and Paul had. Have you?

How do you know? It starts with the gospel itself. Do you know what it is? There is one school of thought—and it’s a pretty big school—that says, ‘to obtain blessings, acceptance, and love from God, you need to avoid bad behavior and put together a track record of good behavior, present that to God, and see what happens.’ But there is another school of thought—namely, the gospel of Jesus—that says, ‘God has, in Jesus, achieved a perfect record and wants to credit that to your account. There is nothing for you to earn or complete, and to be painfully honest, you couldn’t do it if you tried. But you can live every day in the benefits of Jesus’ perfection by faith—just by accepting that what he did counts for you.’

Do you believe that? And when I say “believe”, I don’t just mean, do you agree with it intellectually. I mean, has this reliance on Jesus worked its way into your heart? One sure way you’ll know if it has is to examine the way you look at other people. When the gospel of Jesus takes over your heart, it destroys feelings of superiority—that you are in some way better than others—because we have to recognize that we were all so flawed and self-centered in our own way that Jesus had to die for that. Do you understand? The gospel demolishes a sense of us versus them and enables us to see other people as people with the similar sin struggles and more importantly, the same Savior. This is really, really important. The gospel gives you all kinds of spiritual and emotional tools. It gives you the tools to see that you are more than your work. You have an inherent value that Jesus was willing to redeem with his life. The gospel gives you the tools to be gracious to people who are different than you—to people with whom you disagree—and frees you from having too great a need for the approval of others. I wish we had time to explore all the implications of this—but for now, let me just say this:

If we are serious about being a church that wants to make caring connections with people in our community, we need to pay close attention to this Epiphany mindset. We need to practice and celebrate and embody the message: Jesus is for you, no matter who you are. Whatever your former allegiances were, you can come and approach the Son of God and find in him exceedingly great joy; the mystery of love that has come down to find you.