

Matthew 2:1-12 / January 6, 2008

We have just gone through 3 of the biggest days of the year, at least for Americans. The biggest days we celebrate as Americans, not as Christians but Americans are Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years and 4th of July. Am I forgetting any?

What are the biggest days for Christians? Easter has to be #1, although some would say Christmas. Pentecost the birth of the church would be right up there. Many Lutherans might say Reformation Sunday. Today is Epiphany and that has got to be up there somewhere.

We say Merry Christmas, Happy Easter, I think we should say something like Have an Eye opening Epiphany, maybe there is a better name. I say eye opening Epiphany because that is what Epiphany is about. We suddenly see things we have never seen before or we see things we have seen many, many times before but now we see it differently.

This happens quite often when we read or study scripture. The Holy Spirit takes hold of us and opens our eyes and ears and mind up to something new even with verses we have read and maybe even have memorized before. An epiphany happens, we see, we understand something new. This is why an epiphany is often related to contrition and repentance. Our eyes are opened and we want to change our ways.

Today in our gospel reading we might have an epiphany. In this case it might from keeping an open mind. We are going to try and look at the biblical story we have today. We will try to just look at what the bible says and not to let our traditions influence us. But this is very difficult. This is what Martin Luther was trying to do during the reformation. He was trying to separate what we really know about God through scripture and good reason from the ways that tradition had led the church. Tradition certainly isn't bad in its self. Tradition can be a faithful servant of the faith. It might be a family's tradition to go to church. Not that they are necessarily faithful but they keep the tradition. But the Holy Spirit might use that tradition, that time in church to touch their hearts.

Sometimes even when tradition goes off on a tangent it can be quite harmless. However, sometimes tradition gets in the way of our understanding of the faith. Sometimes tradition leads us down the wrong path.

This is not always easy. We don't always want to hear the truth. Sometimes we are very happy and comfortable with the way we have always understood things, especially our understanding of the faith.

For example, this doesn't have anything to do with faith but I grew up being told and believing that it was a very bad thing to swallow chewing gum. Terrible things could happen if you swallow your gum. I'm not really sure what those terrible things could be but it would be bad. Years later, I have read medical research that indicates that when you swallow gum, nothing happens, good or bad. The body doesn't digest gum and it just goes through you. It goes in and goes out, we won't go into detail.

Now some of you will not believe that research. One of the reasons people won't believe it is because they don't want to believe it. It may be just an old wives tale but we are not willing to give it up. We don't care what anyone else says or shows us we are not going to change our minds. As they say, don't confuse me with the facts.

Some of you are even going to be mad that I brought up the subject because you're afraid that kids will swallow their gum and something terrible will happen.

Putting the gum a side, and I don't mean under the pew. There are many things that we will not give up on. And many of those things don't really make any difference. But let's look at our reading for today and see what we will see.

We have heard the story of the 3 kings, the wise men so often that maybe we don't even hear it anymore. We've seen the movie, the Christmas program, been in the Christmas program, we know the story. Or do we? I wonder if we hear the story that Matthew tells, the one in the bible.

(Matthew 2:1-2) Please turn to the New Testament page 2 in your pew bible In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

How many men are there? Tradition tells us? 3 The bible tells us? It doesn't say anything? The Greek word we find here Magoli Magi is in the plural so all we know is that there were more than one. Could be 3, could be 5, 42. We probably say its 3 because of the three gifts they bring. But the bible doesn't say any amount.

What are their names? The Bible gives no names. One legend lists them as: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar, who was a black man. But the bible doesn't say anything about it.

One of our favorite epiphany songs that we want to sing during advent is "We three kings". If you look at the Greek, the word Magi means a number of things but not a king. Maybe tradition says they're kings because they give Jesus expensive gifts.

The NRSV translates Magi as wisemen. You will notice that there is a notation about it at the bottom of the page that says, astrologers. Many scholars think that saying they are astrologers is being way to generous. Pastor Brian Stoffergan writes:

Originally, in Persia, Magi were dream-interpreters. By Jesus' time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. In fact, our word "magic" or "magician" comes from this word "magi". They were not so much respectable "wise men" or "kings" but horoscope fanatics -- a practice condemned by Jewish standards.

Condemned by Jewish standards, that sticks out, doesn't it?

We might compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, or people on the "psychic hotline" or other "occupations" that fore-tell the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards, etc.

Another writer describes the Magi this way:

The Magi would thus represent, to the early Jewish reader, the epitome of Gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus -- dabblers in chicken gizzards, forever trotting off here or there in search of some key to the future.

This same word occurs in Acts 13. Barnabas and Saul come to Paphos. They meet Elymas, a Jewish Magi. This is how Paul describes him in verse 10:

You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?

You may or may not believe this scholarship. Some may ask, even if this is true, so what?

If we take the traditional approach we could say that these men give honor to Jesus. It is an honor that these, rich, wise rulers would leave their own country, travel very far and give expensive gifts to Jesus.

If we follow the path these scholars are taking we see that God gives honor to the Magi. God reached out to these people, those who would be looked down upon by the Jewish people of this time. The Jewish people would have thought them godless heathen, unworthy to hold the thong of their sandals. Not unlike the shepherds. God leads them to Jesus. They are among the first to see the Christ child. They are made heroes of the story. They respond generously to this privilege.

The end of our reading said they went home by another road. Did Matthew mean they were just going another way to avoid Herod? That's heroic. They risk Herod's wrath for not following his directions and returning to him.

I would like to think that when Matthew says they went home by another way that he also means that they had an epiphany. Their eyes have been opened, their ears have been opened their minds and hearts have been changed. They have been touched by the hand of God and they will not go the same way again.

So we enter into a new year and we also enter into the season of Epiphany, the season of eye opening experiences. It could be very exciting. As we go about our day to day things, at home, at work, at school, where ever we go whatever we do, in prayer in bible study, let's keep our eyes, and ears and mind open to something new God might be showing us. What might God be showing you in your vocational life, your personal life? How about with Urland Lutheran Church? God might take this season of Epiphany to enlighten us to a new way.

God bless you and guide you this week. Amen.