



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God among us. Amen.

Have you ever heard Christians refer to astrologers or fortune tellers as practicing witchcraft? Or heard preachers such as the Pat Robertsons and Franklin Grahams of the world refer to eastern religions as demonic? Harsh rhetoric, to be sure, but it's actually progress considering we once burned people at the stake for having such beliefs. All of which makes today's gospel all the more remarkable because it is these wise men or magi, it is they who are the quintessential, strange mystics from the East, astrologers, magicians, Zoroastrians. We don't know for sure who they were, but Matthew has no problem making them the heroes of our gospel today.

When Christ is born, Matthew makes clear that He's immediately in danger. But it is this group of strangers from a strange land, non-believers who follow stars and listen to dreams who end up saving the day. By telling us the story of the Magi, Matthew is making a huge point that can often allude us, and that is that no one, no one is outside of God's love. And what's more, Matthew seems to be suggesting that even those outside the church, even those without the scriptures, can sometimes seek and find God better than those within it. After all, it's the magi who fall to their knees in reverence when coming face to face with Christ, while Herod, who built the temple, who is at least publicly religious, begins to plot His death.

Matthew is doing this in order to put the readers of his gospel on notice that God's love is for all people, that it will not be held back by religious rules or cultural beliefs. It will not be limited by our fears or our tendency to draw lines or our habit of condemning those who are different. Matthew is trying to tell us that the gospel pronounces once and for all, for all time, that all people are part of God's family. No conditions, no exceptions. And I find it so remarkable that this fundamental idea, this universal, unconditional love of God for all of God's children, that lies at the heart of the Genesis story, that fueled the prophets, that is at the center of everything that Jesus did and tried to teach us, I find it remarkable that it's a lesson that the church still, still struggles with.

The enormity of God's love, the boundlessness of His grace, the endless ocean of His mercy, it has challenged the imagination of believers since the very beginning. Could it really be true? Could God's grace really be a gift? Could God's love really be my birthright? Could "all" really mean "all"? It's all so contrary to the ways of the world that it can be hard to believe. And so, as time

went by, we couldn't help but add some of our own requirements, some of our own conditions, attaching strings wherever we could, but thankfully, the arc of history and the Holy Spirit come again and again and again to challenge our understanding of who is in and who we once thought was out, each time pushing the church to expand its circle wider and wider, each time including more and more of God's children in its understanding of God's grace.

But it's not just a journey for the church. This is a journey for all of us. This is the journey that Jesus comes to invite us into. It's a journey that the Franciscan priest and author, Richard Rohr suggests we could break down into three basic stages. The first is love of self. To accept and honor our own dignity, our own worthiness as something we don't have to earn, as something we don't have to win, as something no one can take away. And many of us will spend much of our life working that one out. But with the grace of God, if we can just take it into our hearts enough, if we can just trust in it enough, we can move to the second stage. We're confident of our own sense of worth. We can start to practice love of others, beginning with those in our tribe. With our friends, with our family, those who look like us, those who live like us, those who speak like us, who believe like us, who go to the same schools and live in the same neighborhoods.

But of course, the key is that when we do get to this stage, as all of us will, that we don't stay. We don't get comfortable there because if we never move beyond those who think like us and vote like us and worship like us, then we will find ourselves forever mired in the endless tribalism that plagues our country and our world. This is the place from which the great commandment is calling us out of. This is the place it's trying to free us from so that we can move to the third stage, which is the love and acceptance of those who are different, those who talk differently, who think differently, those who believe differently, whose practices we don't understand, whose ways make no sense, whose culture seems so backward.

And this final stage also includes loving those we don't like. Those who strike us as pushy, demanding, privileged, self-centered, rude, and it includes loving those who don't like us, who call us un-American, who call us un-Christian, who call us heretics and abominations, who abuse us, who hate us, and even harm us. In other words, the people that Jesus called our enemies. If we can make progress here, if we can lean into this third stage, it means that we are discovering what Jesus tried to teach us on the Cross, that we must surrender our will in order to find God's, that we must die to ourselves in order to truly live.

Matthew introduces the Magi at the beginning of his gospel to invite us into this last stage of the journey. In the same way that Jesus would later do with the Samaritans, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the religiously unclean, the culturally invisible and disposable. In the same way, Matthew is making it clear

that Christ is revealing something much bigger and much bolder than any religion could ever try to control or to contain.

As you heard in Paul's letter to the early church, who also struggled with this, it has now been revealed by the Holy Spirit that the Gentiles, that is all people, have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers of the same promise in Christ, Jesus through the gospel. That is the light of Christ, that the season of Epiphany invites us each to manifest. That is the light of Christ that we are called to bring to the dim corners of our world. And it is the light which the Herods of the world will try to extinguish at every turn. And you can see their efforts everywhere, having become accustomed as we are to our deep divisions where humility and compromise are seen as a weakness, where party lines and tribal purity feed this endless narrative of us versus them.

In fact, it's all become so normalized that like the Magi, we too must stay open to the signs that the Holy Spirit will place on our hearts. Because the Herods of our world come disguised, disguised as normal life, but you can always spot them because no matter the names they go by, no matter the credentials they might have, no matter their celebrity, no matter the wealth they wield or the power that they might have, at the end of the day, in one way or another, the Herods of our day always come to defeat love. The very love that, sadly, they themselves need as much as anyone.

And so they come instead to divide us, to scapegoat us, to pit us against one another. They come as the voices who tell us that some matter more than others, that our fears of the other are somehow justified, that our prejudices and our judgments are somehow sanctified. They come to foster comparison and rivalries to keep us focused on the need to be right and our need to win, our need to be on the "in" crowd and remain blind to those left out. They come to turn life into a treadmill, driven by competition and scarcity, and forever trying to keep up, keeping us busy and so exhausted that we actually can become isolated, running so fast to keep from falling down. We miss out on our own humanity by missing out on one another's.

In fact, if we are honest, the Herods of our day are just as likely to be us. Whenever we get so lost in his system, so caught up in it that we forget that we are called to change it. We are called to stand against it. We are called to stand with anyone who's been beaten down by it. As we begin this epiphany season, my prayer is that we would also follow in the footsteps of these strange Magi from the East. Let us also bow down and pay homage to the enormity and the majesty of God's grace. Let us be in awe of it as well, so that we might take Christ's light into our hearts and find the courage to turn our backs on Herod as well.

***By another road\_ - Epiphany Sunday - 1\_1\_2023***

As we begin this new year, let us also leave by another road and look for Christ in the face of strangers from strange lands, in the face of our enemies close at home, whose ways are not our own, whose beliefs we don't understand, but whose image we share, so that the Lord might rise upon you in God's glory, appear over you so that nations come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Amen.