

January 8, 2017

A CALL TO CHANGE  
Matthew 2.1-12

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The group of Jewish rabbis were obviously nervous as they entered Herod's palace.  
Herod was a tyrant.

What was worse, he was an eccentric and unpredictable tyrant,  
whose wrath might fall on anyone at any time.

The safest thing was to avoid him as much as possible.

But they had been summoned to the palace by Herod himself,  
and they had no idea what Herod wanted.

When they entered the throne room, they discovered that there were others already  
there; a group of men whose strange clothing marked them  
as foreigners from the far east.

as Magi, priest-astrologers of an Eastern, pagan religion.

This must be the group of men who had upset the whole city of Jerusalem by 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."

Herod was blunt, as usual.

He asked them, "Where is the Messiah to be born?"

That was no problem for the rabbis; they knew the answer by heart.

"In Bethlehem, your Majesty, for the prophet has written,

'For you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,

for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

"Thank you. That's what I needed to know. You are dismissed."

It was a relieved group of rabbis who left Herod's palace.

That had gone so much better than they feared it might!

Why did Herod want to know where the Messiah would be born?

Well, who knows what Herod is thinking.

They were just glad to be out of the palace without any trouble with the king.

So, what happened after this interview?

Well, the Magi went on to Bethlehem

and offered their gifts to the young Christ child.

And the rabbis went home!

Isn't that amazing? The rabbis went home!

Those rabbis were wise men.

They were experts in the Scriptures.

They didn't have to consult reference books to answer Herod's question;  
they knew the answer.

But--and doesn't this amaze you?--

But they never went to Bethlehem to find the Messiah.

It wasn't a long trip.

From Jerusalem to Bethlehem is about from here to the airport!

And they never went to Bethlehem!

Don't you wonder why?

Why would scholars who were looking for the coming of the Messiah  
not follow up on a clue which seemed to indicate that Messiah had been born?

The most likely answer is prejudice.

The Jews at that time were terribly prejudiced against Gentiles;

they thought of them as *Gentile dogs*.

The Jews believed that Israel and Israel alone was the object of God's love and care.

So the idea that Gentiles would receive a revelation of the birth of the Messiah,  
no matter how that revelation came, was preposterous.

That prejudice has a certain amount of turf-protection involved in it.

The rabbis were God's representatives and spokespersons for the people.

If they had gone to Bethlehem, they would have undermined their position  
by even considering that God might speak to *Gentiles*.

If they had found the Messiah there, it would have been worse.

They would have had to eat their words, to admit they had been wrong.

Better to laugh it off and stay home.

That should make us stop and think.

Just what kind of people were these rabbis?

The honest answer I'd have to give is they were people like me.

They were religious.

They were students of the Scripture.

They were men who other religious people respected.

And they totally missed the point of what God was doing.

We can do the same thing, you know.

We can be sure that God will always work within our comfort zone,  
and fail to see the new and different things God is doing today.

We can fail to follow the Lord Jesus Christ because we don't like the path he's taking.

We need to be aware of that temptation

and to ask God to keep our hearts and minds open to God's leading,  
even when God leads in ways we would not choose.

Let's think about that for a few minutes.

When we come to worship, don't we want to experience something familiar to us?  
I don't care if you're as old as I am, or as young as my great-grandchildren -  
isn't it true that we come here hoping to experience something that fits our preferences?  
Whether it's the music, or the sermon, or whatever,  
    don't we hope for something that fits in our comfort zone?  
What this passage reminds us is that God doesn't worry about our comfort zones!  
God often works in ways that blow us away rather than make us feel comfortable.

So let's not try to limit God; God simply can't be limited.  
Let's ask God to open our hearts and minds so that we'll be ready to follow  
    no matter where God leads us.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who has included this story.  
Why would Matthew think it was important enough to include it in his Gospel?  
Well, Matthew's Gospel was first written to Jewish Christians  
at the time when Gentiles were beginning to enter the church  
and the church had decided that Gentiles did not have to become Jews,  
    did not have to be circumcised  
    and did not have to keep the purity laws of the Old Testament.  
Many Jewish Christians had trouble with that decision.  
So Matthew introduces the Magi.

When we look at the Christmas story, it is a totally Jewish story.  
Mary and Joseph are Jews.  
Jesus is a Jew.  
The shepherds are Jews.  
Bethlehem is a Jewish town,  
    filled at that time with Jews who are descended from King David.  
The story is Jewish from beginning to end.  
Until the Magi appear.  
The Magi were Gentiles.  
And they were the worst kind of Gentiles.  
They may have been descendants of the Babylonians and Persians  
    who had destroyed Jerusalem  
    and taken the Jewish people as exiles into their distant lands.  
And they were astrologers, who tried to foretell the future by studying the stars.  
Their whole lives were devoted to practices which the Jewish law clearly forbade.  
They were the kind of people with whom Jews would not associate.  
And yet God revealed the birth of Christ to them in a way they would understand,  
    and they came to worship the king of the Jews.  
So from the beginning this new work that God was doing -  
    taking on our human nature so that we might reconciled to God -

was a work that involved *Gentiles*, even the worst kind of *Gentiles*.  
That meant that the church that was becoming a new society,  
in which *Jews* and *Gentiles* could live together in loving fellowship.  
was prefigured by the weird and wonderful appearance of the *Magi*.

The *Magi* were symbols of change.  
They were risk-takers, on a huge scale.  
Ancient tradition says that they came from Persia, Arabia, and far-off India.  
The trip they faced was extremely risky; it was long, hard, dangerous and expensive!  
They risked an inquiry into the meaning of the star,  
not knowing what they might learn.  
They risked a search for the King of the Jews,  
not knowing what or who they might find.  
They took a chance that their lives might be changed  
and their lives certainly were changed.  
I cannot imagine them returning home unchanged, can you?  
Those ancient traditions say that they all became Christians;  
I have no trouble believing that.  
They experienced God's direction and God's grace  
and no one is unchanged who experiences God.

So the question that the *Magi* hold before us is,  
are we willing to be changed?  
Are we willing to open our hearts and minds to the marvellous love of God in Jesus Christ?  
Are we willing to have the Good News touch our hearts as well as our heads,  
to make us change our minds and our ways of living,  
to give us new priorities and new values and new goals?

Epiphany means a revelation of God.  
It also means a moment of sudden revelation or insight.  
In this Epiphany season, may God reveal himself to us in a new way  
and grant us grace to follow where he leads us,  
even if its outside our comfort zones!