

Today is the Epiphany of our Lord. Now epiphany to us is to have a revelation, or an insight out of nowhere.

How its used in the New Testament is appearance. The appearance of the star in the east, leading the Wisemen also known as Magi, to Jesus in his cradle.

Now let's talk about these Magi. Cause they are interesting characters. This text today is scandalous. And the scandal of it is missed on us in the twenty-first century because of how society has depicted the Magi.

We've fluffed them up in Christmas pageants, gave them royal garments and elaborate boxes to carry their gifts to Jesus in . We make them the Right note of royalty for Jesus our king in the manger.

But the Magi, they were not royalty, they may have been associated with royal courts of Persia but that's up in the air for debate.

The Magi were the “ancient equivalent of Magicians- they were astrologers and stargazers who tried to get the hang of present and future events by what was in the stars”¹ They were today's quacks and charlatans.

Even, a Jewish Rabbi wrote long before the birth of Jesus: “He who learns from a magi is worthy of death.”² So this is definitely not a compliment and definitely a weird group of people for God to choose to be the center of this story.

The Magi are unlikely witnesses to an extraordinary event. And not only witnesses but active participants. They somehow correctly interpreted something important had happened on earth by watching the stars. And they were so sure of this that they followed a star and went on a long and dangerous journey to investigate it.

Now the Gospel writer of Matthew is telling us something here. He actually is setting the stage for the rest of his Gospel. He doesn't condemn these astrologers or portray them as quacks like the readers of his time may have thought.

¹Harn, Roger E. Van, ed. 2005. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts, The Third Readings:: The Gospels*. Eerdmans. 4-6.

² Ibid. 6

Rather he's giving us a sneak peak of who Christ will attract. A foreshadowing that **No one is out of reach of God's Grace.**

That Christ attracts the odd Magi to his cradle and will have the same magnetic effect on "samaritan adulterers, immoral prostitutes, greasy tax collectors, despised Roman soldiers, and ostracized lepers"³ and not to mention sinners like you and me.

And Because of how commercialized our holiday seasons have become it is really easy to take a look at manger scenes and not even bat an eye at the hodgepodge of shepherds, Magi, animals, angels, new parents all surrounding a baby.

And after the decorations are all packed up to await another year, the reality of the church is lifted up. That we are a motley hodgepodge of all kinds of different people. All standing around Christ under one roof, and all called together by the grace of God.

But the challenge is to continue to view the church with its hodgepodge of people with the same joy we often can capture during christmas. Sustaining that joy of grace is one of Epiphany's challenges⁴

Transition: And I got to experience some of that overwhelming joy the Magi felt in the presence of Jesus amidst my own unique hodgepodge.

Two years ago I spent time in Israel and Palestine. And the first Holy site we went to was on January 6th in Bethlehem. The Catholic church is built on the spot where they believe the stable was when Mary gave birth to Jesus.

Having gotten off of a very long plane ride, bus ride, and am now Jet lagged it was hard to take it all in.

That this is the place that Christ was born? How could it be? It didn't look anything like I thought it would look.

It was like disneyland on steroids with all the lines, groups, trinkets and decorations. This place didn't feel holy, and that was hard for me to grasp - especially as someone who lives in North America, so far removed from historical biblical sites. I thought it would feel different, smell different, that i would be instantly spiritually filled. But it didn't feel like that.

³ Ibid. 7

⁴ Ibid. 8

One of the unique experiences we got to have was We attended the worship service at the Church of the Nativity. There were at least two thousand people crammed inside and packed into the pews like sardines.

Because today was their Christmas, and Because Christians are the minority in Bethlehem - all are welcomed to worship and commune at the church of the nativity no matter what denomination they are.

And the service was not just in one language- but five. I had no idea what was going on, you kinda looked around and tried to follow along, stood when others stood and kneeled when they kneeled. I sort of followed what was happening and just enjoyed being in the presence of other christians worshipping.

And when it came time for communion, before the Priest could even break the bread, something crazy started to happen.

People began to rush the altar. I'm not exaggerating here, just like a bunch of people at a concert, they rushed the stage.

And I looked at my friends like what the heck is happening? Don't we need to wait in line - aren't there ushers?

And so like good Lutherans we sat and watched. I watched as people were squeezing and elbowing their way to the aisle...and i thought this is just ridiculous. I've never seen this before... and then I was unprepared for what came next.

The people behind us, grabbed our elbows, and beckoned us forward with them. And without hesitating we joined into the rush forward. In to the mishmash of people from all over the world, into the rush forward all eager to get to the bread and the wine.

And I remember just laughing and smiling. Smiling as I was a part of this fervor for the bread in my mouth and the wine on my lips. And I was surrounded by God's people.

It felt like the United Nations all within that church. And what I realized in that moment was how beautiful it all was. How beautiful to see all of God's people eagerly rushing towards Jesus, Eagerly rushing towards the table.

No matter where they were from, or what they looked like, or what language they spoke, and no one seemed to care that they were surrounded by strangers.

I was filled with an overwhelming Joy at being in God's presence, with God's people, and believe me I felt the Holiness in that place in that moment.

The thing is - The reason I wasn't feeling anything at the Holy site of Jesus's birthplace was because--I can feel God's presence anywhere in nature, and i wasn't feeling spiritually filled just because i was at a sight that we deemed holy and historical.

But it was in the moments of Worship alongside God's people and in the breaking of the bread and the drinking of the wine that I was overwhelmed with God's presence in that place. The real presence of Christ filled that space and made it the Holy site that it is.

You see, we are the unlikely people who make historical moments everyday. The church is where all are welcome no matter who you are. And the sad reality is that it hasn't always been that way, but the beautiful thing is that we, us, this hodgepodge of people we are the ones that make up the church, the ones who Jesus beckons to his manger to be a part of his glorious story, we are the people that God has called to keep opening up the doors, to take our friends by the elbow and beckon each other forward to be in the presence of Christ.

There is something truly holy about the fact that God includes these Magi, these seemly outsiders, and makes them active participants in God's redemptive story.

And just like the Magi we too are participants in this story. God comes before us, revealed to us, --sometimes seemingly out of nowhere.

And we, like the magi are filled with Joy, because when God comes close-- we realize just how much God loves us.

And that my friends is something to run towards.

Amen.