

The Weird Shall Inherit the Kingdom of God

Matthew 2:1-12

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Let's start this morning with a pop quiz! Ugh... I know, quizzes are no fun, so I'll make a deal with you: it can be open notes. You have your bulletins with today's lessons on them, so feel free to give them a glance as you answer these questions. First, remind me again, how many wise men are there? ...3? Are you sure? Look again...

Matthew gives us no answer to this question. It just says, in verse 1, "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." Perhaps the number comes from the number of gifts mentioned at the end of the text—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—making three. But in reality, no, the number three isn't mentioned in this text.

Alright, next, what is the occupation of these wise men? Well, our NRSV translation that we use in worship would cause us to answer, "I don't know". I don't think being wise is a profession, but that's all we're given in this translation. Other translations say, instead of wise men, that Magi came from the east. Now it would make sense for Magi to be following a star, as these folks were generally *Astronomers*... if we're being nice. They were more like *Zoroastrian wizard mystics*... if we're being honest. And they were **weirdos**... if we're being blunt.

I love that! These weird star followers have come to celebrate the birth of Jesus. And I like that these are probably strange folks, because this story of the Epiphany is all about a great revealing, a great opening of God's narrative to include those outside of the nation of Israel. And these weirdo star followers are outside the conventional circles of "normal". The Gospel belongs to the weirdos. To me, that's good news!

I've always enjoyed when folks can embrace their own weirdness, claim the things that give them passion and joy. Some call it being weird, I call it being a nerd. Nerds are passionate and have a deep understanding and appreciation for a particular story. Now this may seem a little self-serving, because I've always described myself as a big nerd, but I feel like nerds have quite a bit to teach the church about following Jesus. Discipleship is a lot like being a nerd.

Case in point, I had two friends call me the other night while they were leaving the movie theater after seeing Star Wars. They knew I was a HUGE Star Wars nerd, and they called me to ask me questions. They knew I could connect the dots, they knew I didn't just wear the t-shirts, fight with lightsabers, and decorate my office with Star Wars toys. They knew I

knew the story so well that I could make the connections that bring the seemingly insignificant points of the story to greater life. I also knew that my wife would be sitting next to me on the couch rolling her eyes as I answered their questions one by one. But Nerds are so passionate about a story that they just want to draw everyone else into that same nerdy obsession, and they are staunch defenders of their beloved story. Nerds ARE weird, but I think we as disciples need a little weird in our lives.

Disciples of Jesus are those who know his story, who live his story. Disciples know the story in ways that allow them to make connections to their daily living, to quote the story and be inspired by it daily. Disciples surround themselves with the core themes of Christ's story: love, mercy, forgiveness, and hope. Disciples seek Christ wherever he is to be found, and speak truth to power, subverting those who would distort Christ's story for selfish gain. Disciples do things that others may think is weird, but to disciples, it's the most obvious thing ever. Disciples are just nerds for Jesus!

Church, we need the weirdness of these nerdy Magi, willing to follow the star, willing to put their lives on the line and devote their life and safety to a promise of hope. We need this nerdy desire to not only know Christ's story, but witness to it here and now, always working to draw others in to the story. Epiphany reminds us that we need to reclaim the weird, nerdy nature of our calling to be followers of Christ. Epiphany is a day for claiming the things that make us eccentric and unique as true gifts that can be used for the building of Christ's kingdom here on earth. We all have gifts to share, and who really cares if these things make us weird? The gospel belongs to the weirdos.

But perhaps more importantly than the potential glorification of nerds in general is the fact that the Christmas story doesn't fit into a nice, neat little box. We try to wrap nice, neat little bows on this story, saying that they weren't weird outsiders that many of us would have never given the time of day, but instead they were kings! We call them the three kings, when he only kings mentioned are Herod the Tyrant and Jesus the Messiah. This story doesn't fit in our nice little comfortable nativity scene. The weirdos are welcome too.

The Christmas story has already invited the smelly shepherds who live on the outskirts of town, now the strange magical foreigners are part of the story too... The promise of Christmas can't fit in our neat boxes of in and out. This good news is for all people. God's grace is constantly reaching out to touch more and more lives with hope and promise. This story of Epiphany doesn't let us draw lines. This story of epiphany is one that draws all nations, all people, all "normalcies" into the reign of god. The weird shall inherit the kingdom of God.

So, I don't know if this story of Epiphany is one that calls us to be nerds for the gospel—claiming our own weird place in this ever-widening story of love—or if it's a story that calls us to reexamine the lines we draw of in and out—bringing to light our biases and assumptions about who grace belongs to... Perhaps it's both. I always like to think the most faithful interpretation is the one that challenges us the most.

For me, one of the most challenging aspects of this story was drawn into greater light this week. Historically, many who called themselves "Magi", including the one Magi apocryphally named Melchior in our tradition, hailed from a region called Persia, or in today's geographic language: *He was from Iran*. Now, I know that geopolitical dynamics are much more complicated than a one to one connection like this. But While our world teeters on the edge of open violence, we hear the story of a person we might be quick to call an enemy, who was one of the first to glorify our Lord. Our world has ways of drawing lines between in and out, enemy and friend. Grace doesn't. Christmas doesn't. The grace we and the magi find in that manger is always challenging us to reexamine the divisions we draw, as the story of God's love continues to draw the nations to Christ's light.

However this concluding story of the season of Christmas strikes us, it's clear that the work of Christmas begins today. Howard Thurman, the Author, philosopher, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader penned a famous poem called "The Work of Christmas¹":

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart."*

Fellow nerds, the story of God's love—found in a manger under a bright burning star and heralded by weirdos from far off lands—lives in us now. It is a light meant to dispel the lines of division we draw, and instead draw all people into this passion for Christ's story. Blessed are the nerds, for they shall inherit the kingdom. Blessed are the weird, for they shall see Christ's glory in one another.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/affirmation/now-work-christmas-begins>