

## Sermon by the Rev. Christopher D. Girata

Matthew 2:1-12  
(2 Christmas – Year C)  
3 January 2010

In today's gospel lesson, we hear the story of the wise men who visit Jesus soon after his birth. The story of Jesus' birth in Matthew's gospel is not the same story we typically see portrayed in our Christmas pageants and in our nativity scenes. In Matthew's account, Jesus is not visited by shepherds from the fields who sing praises to God with the angels. The shepherds are only in Luke's gospel story. Rather, Matthew tells the story of the wise men who came to visit Jesus from the East to pay homage to the child who was believed to be the future ruler of Israel. In Matthew's gospel, these strange, well-educated, holy men travel from a distant land, all because they see a star.

Throughout Christian history, the period of Jesus' life right after his birth is remembered as Epiphany. Although Christian groups around the world celebrate the holy day of Epiphany, the two largest branches of Christianity celebrate Epiphany very differently. In the Western Church, we remember Epiphany as the visitation of the wise men from the East. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, Epiphany is a celebration of Jesus' life and ministry on earth in a much larger sense – celebrating his birth, adoration, baptism, and first miracle. Although the Orthodox Church takes a broad view of Epiphany, over time, they have come to emphasize Jesus' baptism above the other events. Their emphasis of Jesus' baptism has created a number of interesting and unique traditions.

For example, the city of Tarpon Springs, Florida is just north of Tampa, near where I grew up. Tarpon Springs has the largest Greek community in the world outside of Greece. Not surprisingly, Tarpon Springs has a very vibrant Greek Orthodox community, as well. Orthodox Christians have always celebrated Epiphany in a very festive way, being one of the greatest days of their church year. But on the morning of January 6th, the official day of Epiphany, Tarpon Springs takes that celebration to the next level. The celebration in Tarpon Springs has made the city known around the world as Epiphany City, USA.

On the day of Epiphany, after church services in the morning, members of the Orthodox community form an impressive procession from the Greek Orthodox Cathedral to a small ocean inlet called Spring Bayou. In addition to thousands of members of the cathedral church and community, the procession also includes around 65 young men who are specially chosen for a very cold swim in the bayou. As the

procession reaches the docks, the young men gather in small boats out in the middle of the water. The Archbishop of the Greek Orthodox Church in America walks to the end of the pier, says a blessing over the water and the young men, and then throws a white stone cross into the water. At once, the boys jump into the water – the very cold water. They battle with one another to be the one to retrieve the Holy Cross from the frigid ocean water. According to tradition, the young man who retrieves the cross is blessed, not to mention he is paraded around town and through the cathedral on the shoulders of his fellow divers. The whole celebration, which draws tens of thousands from around the world, is to commemorate Jesus' baptism, considered the moment when Jesus assumes the mantle of his divine role on earth.

Even though that Epiphany celebration is a fantastic way to remember the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and even though focusing on Jesus' baptism and ministry makes perfect sense, I just can't get the story of the wise men out of my mind. Call me Western, but I am fascinated by the story of these strange men who visit Jesus, but the vague description of the men begs the question: who are these wise men?

The wise men from the East are traditionally believed to have been holy men from Persia, or what today we call Iran. Geographically, socially, and politically, Israel and Persia were extremely separate from one another when Jesus was born. Although today we often speak of that region in unified terms, such as naming the whole of the region the Middle East, the cultures of that region are extremely unique. At the time of Jesus' birth, Israel and Persia had very little in common. So to hear that holy Persian men came to pay homage to a little baby in Israel, just because they saw a strange star in the sky, is remarkable.

These wise men were likely highly educated in philosophy and astrology, which, at the time, was considered to be the principle scientific field. In other words, the wise men were the intellectual and spiritual leaders of their day – truly wise. Yet they left the comforts of their home to make a very long and difficult journey, all because of the rise of an unusual star. Those men, having learned as much as they could of science and philosophy, recognized that the new star announced the fulfillment of the Jewish prophecy – they knew the star heralded the arrival of the new ruler of Israel. From a culture set far apart from the life of the nation of Israel, these men recognized what no other locals could – that God was at work in the world, that God was doing something new.

I heard a story last week of a Christmas Eve church service. The service was planned carefully to the very last detail. The decorations were stunning, yet tasteful; the programs were flawless; and the music was divine. As the procession began, there was excitement in the room because everyone knew that the service was going to be absolutely fantastic. As the opening hymn came to an end, a man walked

through the back doors of the church. He was obviously new to the place – wearing old clothes and looking rather disheveled – certainly not like the well-appointed members of the congregation already present. As he stood in the back of the church, he heard the senior pastor welcome everyone to the celebration of Jesus’ birth, saying that Jesus was born for all of them in the hopes that every person would come nearer to God. The man took the pastor’s greeting literally and began to walk down the center aisle. As people began to notice the man, a quiet whisper started to circulate, growing louder and louder as he finally reached the front of the church. When he reached the front of the church, the man simply stopped and sat down, right in the middle of the aisle. This unknown visitor had effectively stopped the service as the people and the pastors were unsure what to do next.

Then, one of the elderly members of the church, a man who was very well respected, stood up and, with his cane in his hand, began to make his way slowly down the aisle toward the visitor. All eyes were glued to the old man as the church members wondered how he would convince this visitor to move. When the old man reached the end of the aisle, he smiled kindly at the visitor, turned and hung his cane on the end of the nearest pew, and slowly and carefully – with the wisdom of many years on his shoulders – the old man sat down in the middle of the aisle right next to the visitor.

The story of Christmas is so familiar that we often lose the excitement of the event. Jesus was born humbly and quietly in a little town, but in that moment God was doing something new, something absolutely revolutionary. The work God was doing in the world through the birth of Jesus was not seen by the people who surrounded him because they weren’t looking for anything new. God’s work was only recognized by those from far away who were looking. Our lives are filled with the beauty and newness of God. Look around, God is working in the world every day, if only we have the wisdom and the eyes and the faith to see.

Amen.