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First Congregational UCC, Appleton WI
January 5, 2025, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

It's been fifteen years now, but I remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. We were finally getting the hang of getting out the house with a baby in tow, so we decided to visit one of our favorite spots: Amoeba Records, an enormous independent music store in Hollywood.

It turned out to not be the easiest place to navigate a stroller; we seemed to always be in someone's way, and people did not really take kindly to you obstructing their way to the rare jazz albums and new punk releases. By the time we brought our stack of used CDs to the cashier, I suspected bringing a baby had been a bad call. But then the cashier went nuts over our sleeping infant. He couldn't contain his genuine excitement. Mind you, this was a very cool guy - a Hollywood hipster through and through - but all his cool fell away in the presence of an adorable baby.

With rather salty language, he started gushing about how amazing babies are - how wild and astonishing yet normal it is for them to spend the first nine months of their lives inside of their mothers. He shared that when his best friend had a baby, he would hold the child for hours at a time, in complete wonderment at the ordinary miracle in his arms.

He was truly overwhelmed with joy in the face of new life. As we turned to leave, he raced over to the bin where they kept the Amoeba Records t-shirts, and fished out the smallest one he could find. He tossed it into our bag and insisted it was a gift for our child.

This was the moment I had the kind of epiphany preachers live for: this indie music store employee was embodying the story of Epiphany. He wasn't one of the Magi, and my kid certainly wasn't the newborn Messiah. He didn't journey to us by way of a star, and the gift of a purple and neon green t-shirt wasn't gold or frankincense - though we did treasure it so much both of my kids wore it until it was finally retired to the "save for the grandchildren" bin.

The thing about the encounter with the Amoeba clerk that most reminded me of Epiphany was simple: his overwhelming joy. Some translations of the Bible interpret that part of the story pretty mildly, recalling that the Magi were "overjoyed" when they saw the star.

This is one of those occasions where I prefer the language of the old school King James Version. In that translation, the three Kings of the Orient "rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

Another reader notes that "[This] description bends over backward with expression! The New Revised Standard Version [also] tries to subdue the hyperbole, saying simply they were "overwhelmed with joy,"

but that sounds like an understatement. Something amazing happened to the wise men. They had a moment of revelation, a transcendent experience of the divine, and they could not contain their joy. Another reader notes, "They had lost the composure and reserve of scholars and sages, giving way to an ecstasy of... adoration."

Now, this is a painfully obvious observation, but still: everybody gets born. Everybody was a baby once. And on Christmas, the commonplace miracle of new life collides with the rarest and least common of all miracles: God gets born. God becomes human. The circle of once-newborns expands to include the Creator of the moon and stars.

God chooses to enfold Divinity into flesh and bones. Like every child, God has a gender, a name, a heritage. Like every child, God has fingernails and funny bones. In the case of the incarnation, God becomes Jesus of Nazareth, a descendent of the house of David.

And in the case of Epiphany, it becomes clear that God didn't become a man only for other men, or other Nazarenes, or other Israelites, or only for those of his generation. God became human for all people, in all times and places. And just as all people are born, all people are invited to be born again in the spirit of Christ.

Epiphany celebrates that the incarnation is for everyone. The star shines for all of humankind. The light is brilliant enough to illuminate the way for all the world.

This is more than enough reason to be overjoyed, to be overwhelmed by joy, to rejoice with exceedingly great joy.

Considering how delighted we are when a new baby joins our church family, how silly some of us get when we're in the presence of even a stranger's child, how can we respond to the birth of God with anything other than our whole selves?

It's easy to tell ourselves that the Magi are different from us. They are literally foreigners in the story – wise men from the East, maybe Persia. Yet in many ways we are closer to the Magi than to the Holy family. Most of us are Gentiles, outsiders. Most of us are not descendants of Israel, not children of Abraham and Sarah.

Most of us are descended from Gentile converts to Christianity. These Magi mark the first Gentile converts to the way of Christ. They are our spiritual forebears, as much as any of the heroes and villains of the Old Testament. They are brave and bold and perhaps even a little foolish. They go a long way guided by nothing more than a star, the astrological equivalent of a wing and a prayer.

The poet W.H. Auden, in his fifty-page poem about Christmas, imagines the wise men as especially vivid characters. They say, "At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners, That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners, And miss our wives, our books, our dogs, But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are. To discover how to be human now Is the reason we follow this star."

To discover how to be human now, is the reason we follow this star.

And another poet, William Carlos Williams, writes his answer to the quest of the three old sinners. In his own Epiphany poem about the Magi, Williams proclaims, "All men by their nature give praise. It is all they can do." The journey that begins in darkness and danger and mystery ends in brilliant, resounding praise.

The wise men end up on their knees, kneeling in joyous awe in the presence of new life. If we want to discover how to be human, we must follow the star that brings us to the manger in Bethlehem.

We must be willing to be pilgrims, choosing faithfulness over comfort and pride. We must be willing to let holy joy be our moral compass, leading us to reject violence, resist oppression, and like those Magi before us, to go follow a pathway of peace - Herods of the world be damned.

We must be capable of losing our cool, ditching our cynicism, opening ourselves to all the miracles God lends this beloved Creation: from the stars to the newborns. We must be ready to see Christ not only as an adorable baby in a manger, but in the face of every sister, every brother, every stranger, every sinner.

May the glory of the Lord that rises upon us on this Epiphany Sunday open our eyes to the simple miracles of new life and sacrificial love, and may we share in the exceedingly great joy of the wise ones, now and always. Amen.