

Wise People
Matthew 1:1-17
Matthew 2:1-23

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 1:1-17

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Matthew 2:1-23

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And 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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with

Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

The list of names I read this morning may be, after certain parts of Leviticus, the most frequently skipped section of Scripture. When you first read it, all you see is a list of names. Bo-o-o-ring! And meaningless. Biblical trivia.

Unless you know some of the stories that Matthew is referencing.

Abraham was the wanderer from Ur whom God told to go seek a new place, the place that God would show him, and God would make of him a great nation. Isaac is the son God gave Abraham and Sarah, and Jacob is his son, the swindler-turned-patriarch.

Tamar was Judah's daughter-in-law, who was forced to seduce her own father-in-law to acquire the twin sons she needed for her inheritance and security.¹

¹ Genesis 38.

Rahab was a prostitute from Jericho who helped the Hebrew invaders to capture her hometown.² She then married into the Hebrew people. Her son Boaz married a Moabite refugee named Ruth, and their son was the grandfather of the legendary King David.

You know the story of David and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Their son was the wise but flawed King Solomon. His descendants included a mix of good and bad kings, good and bad people.

Jesus' ancestry is a mix of good people and bad people. People whom we would consider respectable, even admirable, and people whom we wouldn't want to be publicly associated with. I'll come back to that.

So, today's Epiphany.³

Epiphany is one of those Church holidays that we American Protestants, comparatively, don't talk very much about, like Maundy Thursday and Whitsunday.⁴ Whether that's because we're uncomfortable with something we see as "too Catholic," or it's just easier and tidier to bundle the Magi up with the Christmas pageant and be done with them in December, I don't know.

In the East, Epiphany is a bigger deal. You don't give Christmas gifts, you give Epiphany gifts, since that's when Jesus received gifts. There is a huge focus on the Magi and on Jesus' baptism, which we'll talk about next week.

² Joshua 2, 6.

³ This sermon owes much to a blog post by the Rev. Dr. Gary Neal Hansen.

⁴ Aka Pentecost.

So, Epiphany. The word means an “appearance,” or a “manifestation,” or “a moment of sudden revelation or insight.” As a Church holiday, it is about Christ appearing to the non-Jewish people of the world. People like most of us.

Jesus was a Jew, and he came first to the Jews.⁵ But even this early in the story, God is making sure everyone knows that he came to be the savior for everyone.

A lot of tradition has grown up around the Magi, but most of it is, at best, unsupported by Scripture. We don’t know that they were kings. We don’t know that they were men, or all men: the word “Magi” could refer to professional “wise people” of any gender. We don’t know that there were three of them. We don’t know that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. We don’t know that they came from three different nations.

Most of this tradition comes from mystery plays, short dramas that were used to teach the stories of the Bible in the Middle Ages to illiterate people. They simplified the story, invented details, and made things that were vague definite, to be able to show the story in a brief drama.⁶

What we actually know about the Magi is this:

There were more than one of them.

They were genuinely wise people from a country or countries far away to the East.

They were not Jews. They did not come to seek the newborn King of the Jews because the Biblical prophets told them to.

We know this because they had to ask where he would be born. If they had known the Hebrew Scriptures, they would have been able to bypass Herod and go straight to Bethlehem. Instead, they were looking for the king of the Jews, so they went to the Royal palace.

⁵ People who deny this, as Anti-Semites do, contradict Scripture and show that they don’t understand either Jesus or his coming to Earth.

⁶ For examples, see *The Wakefield Mystery Plays* published by Anchor Books, <https://www.yorkmysteryplays.co.uk/>, etc.

They did not come because the Biblical prophets told them to.

They came because they had inquiring minds, as the old tabloid slogan would say. They were looking for the truth and for what things meant, using the science and insight of their own culture.

And they found Jesus.

They were not the descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but they found Jesus.

And they worshipped him.

They were not the people of the Covenant, but they found Jesus.

And they worshipped him.

They were not following the words of the prophets whom God had sent, but they found Jesus.

And they worshipped him

As the theologian Gary Hansen said, “The wrong people came, they came the wrong way, and God welcomed them.”⁷

God not only welcomed them, God used the gifts they brought to help make God’s plan happen in the world. The resources they brought, the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, made it possible for Joseph and Mary to keep the infant Jesus alive through their refugee flight to Egypt. You could argue that Jesus survived infancy, with the king who wanted to kill him, because these wrong people came and found him in Bethlehem.

⁷ Gary Neal Hansen, <https://garynealhansen.com/monday-meditation-rcl-years-abc-epiphany-lord-matthew-21-12>

These wrong people were a lot like many of the wrong people in Jesus' family tree. A respectable Pharisee in Jesus' day would not like to think about how many non-Jews and scandalous events were part of this story.

Respectable Pharisees still don't.

A swindler, Jacob, who cheated his own brother out of his birthright became the paterfamilias of a huge family, and the ancestor of all of Israel. His granddaughter-in-law, Tamar, deceived and seduced her own father-in-law to get a child, and one of her twin sons continued the lineage to Jesus. One descendant, Salmon, married a foreign prostitute just before the Hebrews killed everyone else in her city. Their son married a Moabite refugee named Ruth.

Ruth's great-grandson David was a legendary king, who raped the wife of one of his warriors. God did not will that – it was not God's plan that Bathsheba should be raped. But, when it happened, God used it.

Solomon was a wise king, in some areas of his life, anyway. God used the wise things that he did and didn't use the others. After Solomon's death, the kingdom couldn't hold together, and his descendants were the sometimes good, sometimes terrible kings who led one of those kingdoms until Babylon came along and conquered them.

God did not bless King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Babylon were never God's people. God used Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon. The story was never about them. They were a tool that God used. to teach God's people and help bring them back into line.

So what does all this mean for us?

It means that we don't have to be perfect people in order to be good Christians. Nadia Bolz-Weber pointed out that "Never once did Jesus scan the room for the best example of holy living and send that person out to tell others about him. He always sent stumblers and sinners. I find that comforting."⁸

We don't have to be perfect people to be part of God's plans for the world. "Sometimes the fact that there is nothing about you that makes you the right person to do something is exactly what God is looking for."⁹

Sometimes I think God looks at us and says, "...Seriously?" But then God works with it. And God works with us.

It means that if you aren't perfect, and your life isn't perfect, don't panic!

Don't get complacent, or think that you don't need to do the best you can, but God doesn't call perfect people. They're kind of thin on the ground, you may have noticed. If you think you've completely messed up God's plan for your life, then be comforted. You, my beloved brothers and sisters, are not that powerful.

It means that, if the lives of those around you aren't perfect, don't panic!

Welcome them. Work with them. They, too, are part of God's plans for the world.

Wise people understand that, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are the imperfect, forgiven children of God. It doesn't matter how you got here, whether your parents brought you for baptism as an infant and you've been in the Church ever since, or if you just wandered in looking

⁸ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People* (2016).

⁹ Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints*, op. cit.

for something else. There is no age requirement. There is no racial purity requirement. There is no social respectability requirement. The Jesus who was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard, who spent his time with prostitutes and tax collectors, will spend time with you.

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.