

Every year in January the wise men come wandering in from the East, stir up King Herod and all of Jerusalem with their news, push on from there to Bethlehem and find Mary and Jesus and present their precious gifts, and then they leave, returning home by that “other” road.

Every year on the first Sunday of Advent, we decorate the sanctuary together during worship. The doves find their seasonal roost on the tree, the wreathes are hung, and the nativities are arranged, each piece of the ceramic one carefully unwrapped and set in place here in the sanctuary while the wooden one claims the table out in the narthex for 6 weeks.

Through the nativities, we “see” the Christmas story that tells about Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Each figure comes walking right out of the Bible text, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and sheep, the wise men and camels, and an angel to represent the *multitude of heavenly hosts* who appeared to the shepherds in the first place and urged them to find the baby who had been born that night and was *lying in a manger*. And because there’s a manger mentioned, we add a stable where we bed down a cow, and even tether a donkey in the scene, imagining that was how Mary and Joseph made the trip to Bethlehem in the first place!

Now if we subjected our version of the Christmas story we construct with our nativity sets to a Verify Fact Check team’s scrutiny, we’d listen politely but likely dismiss their assessment of what is true and what is false according to the Biblical texts. The stable, cows, donkeys, sheep, and angels would all be at risk of not being present Christmas Eve, along with the wise men and their faithful cud-chewing, lumbering camels, because that’s how it was

the Fact Check team would report, according to the accounts we read in Luke and in Matthew. Like we noted, we'd listen politely and keep the stable and every added figure and untimely wise man and camel right where it is, and in defiance, we might even add a young shepherd boy with his faithful dog!

Yet according to what we read in Matthew this morning, the wise men were not present when Jesus was born in the stable. Some time had passed since his birth, before they made the journey to find him. Mary and the "child" Jesus were living in a house in Bethlehem, but the wise men did not know that until they arrived in Jerusalem, and asked for information regarding the birth of one they had determined was to be the *king of the Jews*. They were astrologers who studied the stars and constellations and had seen a "birth star" arise that led them to leave their homeland and travel west in their quest to pay homage, to worship this "king."

Herod was rattled by the news of wise men in the city inquiring about the birthplace of a star-predicted future king of the Jews. Any perceived threat to his power was unnerving. According to prophecy, the priests and scribes reported that Bethlehem was where the Messiah, the king of the Jews, would be born. Herod summoned the wise men before they went on their way and asked them to return to Jerusalem and bring him the location of the "star-baby" when they found him.

Bethlehem lay a bit less than 8 miles south of Jerusalem. It would have been just a few hours' journey away. When they found Mary and the child Jesus, the wise men were "overwhelmed" with joy we read, and "they knelt down and paid him homage," they worshiped Jesus. Then they gave him the precious gifts they had brought on that journey, expensive gifts fit for a king. And heeding

Divine instructions, they left Bethlehem and headed back to their homeland by “another road,” in other words, they did not go back and report anything to Herod.

With Bethlehem so near to Jerusalem, it would have been just a matter of days before Herod would have realized the wise men were not returning to him with any news. That would answer the angel’s urgent message to Joseph telling him “flee to Egypt” with Mary and Jesus, and Joseph’s quick response. Herod’s ruthless order to kill all baby boys living in Bethlehem aged two and under was his desperate attempt to wipe out any possible threat of a prophecy-fulfilled Messiah born there!

Luke brought shepherds, the outcasts of their day, to worship Jesus when he was born. The shepherds signified Jesus’ future ministry to the poor and the powerless, as he ministered to their needs and taught that the kingdom of God was theirs.

Matthew brought wise men from the East, outsiders at best, vilified astronomers at worst in the eyes of the Jews to worship the child, Jesus; wise men who took a long, risky journey to find him; who were elated when they did; who knelt in worship before him; who gave him the gifts they had brought for him, this child revealed to them as being born a king, the king of the Jews. Through the story of the wise men, all people, all nations, not just the Israelites but *all people including the Gentiles*, those deemed not to be among God’s favored people, were included in the realm of God’s love.

In Christ’s eyes and according to his teachings, there were no outcasts to be avoided nor outsiders to be excluded from God’s love. There is no boundary we can fix around God’s grace, no time

nor place that exists where it cannot be known. There is no prescribed formula to precipitate it, nor an authenticating, authorized experience of it. The word “them” falls by the wayside giving way to “us;” each “us” filled with individual traits and personalities that differentiate but do not divide.

We assemble our Nativity every Christmas season, and fill it with the story we have made of Jesus’ birth. On Epiphany Sundays through the generations, the wise men have come from the East with an ageless story for the church and for every Christian to hear again: *There is no boundary we can fix around God’s grace, no time nor place that exists where it cannot be known*—at any time, in our lives, in the lives of others, in our world. With our hearts open, may the words we say and the work we do and the desires we pursue be the manifestation of God’s grace at work in our lives; God’s grace ever at work throughout our world. Amen!

*“Epiphany—the manifestation of God’s grace”* Matthew 2:1–12

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