

“On Pilgrimage”
Mathew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-7
Ms. Andrea Perrett
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Thank you for having me here today again. My name is Andrew Perrett, and glad to be back at home at RPC.

I'm going to start with a survey so get your hand ready who here waited until January 6th or after January 6 to put away their Christmas decorations? oh I see a couple hands. Great! I'm sure this was purely for liturgical reasons that you waited this long. I see Richmond has left the sanctuary dressed as well. Hmm... raise your hands. Who left their decorations or put their decorations down earlier?

And on-line you're welcome to let us know in the comments when you did. Who's leaving their decorations up until February? Anyone? I see some proud February decorators. January 6th is epiphany. The day when we celebrate the journey of the magi. And it is officially the end of the 12 days of Christmas. I know culturally Christmas kind of ends on Christmas Day, and then we hurry on to new and different things. But in our Christian calendar Christmas starts, the Christmas season starts December 25th and goes until January 5th, with January 6th being epiphany.

Today, it is technically if we have any Anglicans or Catholics with us? Technically we should be the baptism of Jesus today. But, since we've all just confessed to be non-liturgical we're going to keep being non liturgical today and rewind 2 days to epiphany. I were rewinding from the baptism to linger on the magi a little bit longer I just personally love spending time thinking about these astronomers and what it means to our faith and our church today. So thank you for letting me indulge. We are actually rewinding 30 years or so, because Jesus is baptism happens kind of at the start of his what we have documented of his earthly ministry.

We are going back to when Jesus was around two years old. The story of the Wisemen, the astrologers, the magi, the outsiders who come from afar and enter into Jesus's story. Before we talk about them though, we need to talk about Herod, king Herod, or Herod the great, was the local king during Jesus's birth. Now Herod was appointed by the Roman emperor, so actually was a bit of a puppet king. He was there to keep the Jewish people in order. Herod himself was half Jewish and was also loyal to the Roman Empire. And history I think rightfully remembers him as brutal and vicious. He was a ruler who fought hard to keep the throne, and so we remember his name today for that although we aren't to confuse the Herod the great with Herod Agrippa or Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. In general though if their name is Herod, there's a good reason we don't look on them kindly.

During the times in Israel leading up to Jesus's birth things are going relatively well for Herod. Rome is happy with his leadership and describes in the priests in the local politicians are all pretty much in line with Herod's rule. Hashtag #blessed is what Herod probably thought if there were hashtags. But then in our story after we have the great nativity story in Matthew, Matthew chapter 2 tells us that three outsiders come along. They give Herod a bit of a shock they tell him something that he has been blind to, something that has taken place in his own backyard. There is a different king a king of the Jews who has been born. These astronomers upon seeing the star they've traveled a great distance on a pilgrimage to Israel and now they've stopped by the palace to find the king. But they are unaware that the king that they find does not know where this new king is, and hasn't even heard that there is a new rival king in town.

This is news to Herod, he's disturbed and afraid. How does he not know about this? I'm sure we can relate on some level to Herod being told something that we probably should have known. A relationship that we thought was going strong and then a small comment points out the obvious that we've been denying to ourselves, or perhaps we have business plans that have one teeny tiny catastrophic flaw that someone else can see but you can't. Or maybe you've built a beautiful new building that you don't realize looks like a toilet when you look at it from above, true story from my hometown.

But in general we don't like to be told something that we should have known all along, and we especially don't like to be told that from outsiders, especially outsiders who have been paying attention and looking at the signs that we should have been looking at all along, especially Persian astronomers who have been able to see something that those who were right there were not able to see, those who have observed a star in the eastern sky that signalled Jesus's birth and are on a pilgrimage to worship him. There were a lot of signs for the local Jewish people that's the thing including king Herod who could have been at watch for them. We've just gone through advent and Christmas reciting the scriptures about the Messiah and in fact when king Herod calls together his leaders. They actually do know the signs that have been foretold. Verse 4 in our scripture today reads when he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born? In Bethlehem, in Judea, they replied for it's what the prophet has written.

So they knew, maybe they forgot to tell him. When we dig deeper we see that even the journeying wisemen to Israel and their gifts all of this had been prophesied for hundreds of years. Isaiah 60 which was read beautifully, the Messiah is described that the Jewish people are waiting for, and they were told that outsiders will come and bring their frankincense and myrrh. In this story it is the outsiders who are the ones who see the signs, the ones who have kept their ears open, the ones who have responded by starting on a journey. They are on a pilgrimage to go and worship the new king.

Going back to Christmas decorations I raised my hand to say I took them down early we did that last weekend or we get all blends together at some point it's not quite as much of a joyous activity taking the decorations down as it is putting it up. But it is a task that I cherish you get to contemplate the stories behind some of the different ornaments.

Think about how they were acquired or who has given them to you, to remember the person in the stories, laugh at the childhood ornaments and the adult creations from Christmas craft parties. One of the parts that I enjoy about Christmas undecorating is pausing to look over my nativity scene to take out the tubs and the boxes and gently put them back into their tissue paper homes for another year.

I don't think it's a problem yet but I do have quite a few nativities I might have to peel back a bit in future years but I do love the different depictions of the Christmas story. I have a miniature desktop figurine that I put up at the beginning of advent in my office and I have a nativity scene from Guatemala that has tiny clay figurines and they're dressed in traditional Mayan clothing. When I was in Malawi a few years ago I hunted and hunted for an found a traditional nativity carving where instead of a stable it has a traditional Malawian village hut. I also have a black bear wooden carving with black bear Jesus and the peanuts where snoopy is baby Jesus as well. And this year we acquired the ever so traditional fisher-price little people nativity where the Angel sings away in a Manger, until the batteries run out.

I'm intrigued by nativity scenes because for me they are signs of the invitation that we each received to enter into Jesus' story. We know, I think we know, that Jesus did not actually come in the form of a black bear cub or in the form of sassy black and white dog named snoopy, but sometimes it's harder for us to remember that Jesus didn't come as a blonde hair blue eyed fair skinned baby. On the slides today, I have three images of the nativity scene that I wanted to show. So the first one if we can go back one slide this one illustrates much better than my black bear costs could do it. Sarah Choi is a Korean sculptor who lives in the UK this is titled three wisemen from Korea. If you can see, here's what she says, "they could come from anywhere in the east, so why not Korea? And I put them in the old traditional Korean costumes".

The next slide, this is it's called a 'lino cut' I know it's hard to see I encourage you to look it up later. This is by Zhari Fhaba, who is South African lived 1941 to 2018. This is called 'The Nativity from the 1960s'. It's a linocut and it's if you look if you can see there are local animals and local clothing in which Mary and Joseph are wearing. Authori wrote, the three wisemen approach on elephant back. So if you look at the far left, my left that side of the picture you see the wise men coming in on elephants. And behind king Herod lurks with a lion and a spear, waiting to pounce on this perceived threat. So this is the negativity that has come out of South Africa.

And one more, one more slide hopefully! Yes! OK, so this is the big picture and we're going to zoom into the far right one. This is a advent is called a 'Trifict' John August Swanson is an American and actually died just two years ago, but over three years he created these three pictures that's paper layering technique is called 'epiphany', and this far one which I realize, is actually quite small.

Those watching at home you get a better view of this today. But John Swanson he had a Mexican mother and was deeply inspired by the Mexican tradition so if you can see the families are in kind of local Mexican colours and clothing and there's exotic birds

and Peacocks and it's made in a Mexican tradition where families themselves would create a creche 'nacimiento' and they would build in the environment around it. So John Swanson has built in a traditional Mexican environment around this Nativity. So those were three that I found this last week.

Actually on Instagram art and theology you can give that a follow but it really just helped depict the nativity in different local contexts. And for me this reminds us that Jesus enters into our story and enters into our own context. The good news that we receive is a seed of the gospel that grows into a beautiful plant and garden that is culturally appropriate, contextually appropriate, timeline appropriate, expression of the Christian witness.

Reminds us that there's no one exact way to be Christian or to journey along with Christ. This is what the wise men bring in to our gospel. In the Christmas story very early on Matthew 2 this is what epiphany is a whole day in our Christian calendar not just to recognize and celebrate the wise men in Jesus being given gifts, but also to celebrate that Christ is recognized and revealed to outsiders, and those outsiders are brought into the story as they are drawn in to see that light that shines out of Israel.

The magi, marked the beginning of the pilgrimage that millions of outsiders have taken to the gospel, drawn in by that mystery of salvation. And I think when we look at our scripture epiphany comes before the baptism, the outsiders are recognized before the insiders recognize who Jesus is. That's something that we should hold onto. Now bringing in outsiders is not without its challenges. Look at Herod, it's not a great situation. Outsiders can be hard, it's threatening. All we have to do is look at the state of the world today and how many of the troubles both locally and nationally are caused by fear of outsiders.

In our story Herod is threatened by another power and instead of being curious and investigating, tries to have Jesus killed. And in what follows Jesus and his family are forced to do, leave Egypt. They become outsiders themselves refugees, strangers living in a strange land. But for those of us who have been on the outside unless anyone here was born Jewish we were all once on the outside. This is a story that opens up and invites us in. The gospel is open wide so that we can join in together on a pilgrimage to worship Jesus. There's no specific guest list of who can worship Jesus, there's no requirement of status or money or class there's no one race religion, ethnicity, or heritage that holds privilege to begin that pilgrimage.

Jesus is for all of us and we were all on a pilgrimage to Jesus. Although I will confess it is tempting to become an insider ourselves to take a trade mark out on the depiction of the story to reserve the rights to our nativity depiction. To not want to share with others and to stop looking for the signs of Jesus out there in the world around us. But we have a God who continues to invite us and to turn to turn outwards to be led by the spirit out into the world on pilgrimage with outsiders to worship Jesus.

And the thing is, some of those who are on the outside are so much better still at seeing the signs and seeing what God is up to. We love to contain and domesticate Jesus just a little bit too much. So yes! we want to contextualize and have these depictions of Jesus that look like us, but we have to toe that line of that's not the only way.

Our way is not superior or the right way. So it's a both and. We both have to remember outsiders at the welcoming and we get to contextualize the nativity to ourselves. We're still in the new year's haze or at least I still am most of my social media conversations and emails and everything begins with happy new year. And there's been a lot of trends this year setting New Year's invitations. New Year's intentions, not invitations. What do you want this new year to be?

This past week I saw someone setting their attention. Marcie Elvis Walker, she's a black American writer. What she says I think applies to Canadians too, and her intention, her desire, her wish for this coming year this is what she wrote. This year, "I hope all Americans and I will substitute Canadians or Westerners whatever you want. This year I hope that all learn that Jesus was a Jew from Nazareth, not Judeo-Christian. Hope that they learned that Jesus was a Middle Eastern man, not European, or Canadian, or American, or British.

I hope they learn that Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew, or Greek, or Latin, or English. I hope they learn that Jesus was the descendant of enslaved people who lived as an immigrant in an occupied land and had no wealth or status or formal education. This is the tension that epiphany brings, that epiphany holds and encourages us to remember. That, yes! contextualizing the gospel to each situation, and honoring the original context of the gospel story. Translating it into our own language and remembering that Jesus spoke Aramaic. Putting on culturally appropriate clothings in our nativity scenes and remembering what Jesus wore and what people ate in his time.

The thing is our triune God, Jesus, Holy Spirit God is big enough for both of these things. And when we hold both of these in tension, it impacts our witness of the gospel to others. It impacts how we talk about the gospel to one another and how we share it with others. Do we make room for outsiders especially those who have seen the signs for coming in and saying I've seen the signs. Or do we only share the version that has been created and crafted in our own image?

We are all on pilgrimage seeking out the long-awaited king who has been born. Some of us are on a longer version a longer journey starting from further away. Some of us have been living closely under the star, but God invites each of us on a pilgrimage to come and meet Jesus and to worship Him. The wisemen, the magi, the astronomers they were outsiders on a pilgrimage to worship Jesus and this gives us a hint of how inclusive are Messiah will come to be.

Outsiders who have journeyed long and hard to come and worship. And later in his ministry Jesus will heal Jew and gentile alike. Roman centurion and canaanite woman too. And after Jesus dies for the sins of the world upon the cross the disciples have been sent out to baptize the nations and the apostle Paul takes the good news of Jesus is, love across the world.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with non Jewish people coming to Bethlehem to find Jesus and concludes with Jewish disciples going out to all the nations to share the good news with others. We have a God who is not contained by geographical boundaries who invites every person to enter a journey to worship him.

We have a God who enters our own stories and meets us in our own circumstances and journeys along with us. So this epiphany, this new year as you continue your journey, your pilgrimage on with Jesus that you may join with one another recognizing the outsiders who come along and celebrating and worshipping Jesus along the way.

May it be so!