

Unexpected But Invited | The Feast of the Epiphany | January 6, 2019
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God makes those who are outsiders into The Insiders by His grace-filled invitation.

The Introduction →

This morning we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. It's a day in the church year, always celebrated on January 6th, that doesn't get much attention because it rarely falls on a Sunday as it does today. But since it does fall on Sunday today, we're going to use it as an opportunity to begin our new sermon series called "The Insiders".

The season of Epiphany is a time that focuses our attention on a couple of different things. One is the revealing of the person of Jesus to the world - who he is as the Son of God. But it's also about the Epiphany of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. So it's a season that focuses our attention on missions and outreach, the spreading of the Gospel to those who are seemingly on the outside. Or maybe more accurately it's a season that focuses our attention on the radically inclusive nature of the love of God in Christ. It's for everyone.

Our Gospel reading this morning bears that out as the Magi themselves are a perfect example of just how broad God's mission in this world is.

The Magi →

The Magi are an interesting and mysterious lot. Much lore has grown around them throughout the centuries and this story is so familiar, much like the Christmas story itself from Luke 2, that its purpose and its surprising nature have been obscured from us modern readers. But this group of people, which we call the Magi, who have often been called "kings" or "wise men". In reality, they were neither wise nor were they kings! They were astrologers, sorcerer's, practitioners of the dark arts. They were not wise but rather they were pagan fools!

The Bible bears this out as in two other places we see the word "magi" show up. First in the greek translation of the OT, Daniel *** and then in Acts 13:8. Both times we see that magi points to pagan practitioners of magic and sorcery. Both times the magi are people who are specifically opposed to the will and purpose of God.

So their presence in the narrative of Jesus' birth should strike us as utterly surprising. These Gentiles, trained in the dark arts, simply do not have a place in the story...or at least they shouldn't! They would be the last people on earth a pious Jew would think to be present at the birth of the Messiah because these men would seem to be the furthest from God one could possibly get. As practitioners of magic, they were indeed in full rebellion against God and creation.

Why is this important? Why am I trying really hard to ruin the romantic picture of the Three Wise Men whose studies have led them to the side of the newborn Jesus? Well,

because it's precisely the surprising nature of their presence that gives this story its bite, and it gives to us the entire point of the season of Epiphany and, frankly, the mission and purpose of the birth of the Christ Child in the first place.

Despite all that they have going against them, the fact of the matter is that the magi, against all odds, have been invited by God to come and pay homage to the Christ. And the presence of the magi there tips us off to the fact that the mission of God in Christ is more expensive than we ever imagined. These unexpected guests are not, after all, uninvited guests. Unexpected from a human perspective. Unexpected because they're not the kind of guys you would even want to be present at the side of the Savior. But the gracious invitation by God gives us a foretaste of what Jesus will say at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Go and make disciples of *all nations*.

Because of God's gracious invitation, these Magi who were once outsiders are now The Insiders, welcomed into the presence of Jesus where they come to pay him homage.

The Congregation →

Indeed, just as the presence of the Magi was a surprising turn of events in the birth narrative of our Lord, so too is your presence here today in the presence of Christ, surprising. That might be a rather shocking statement for some for how many of you have ever considered yourselves an outsider here? This is what Paul claims in our Epistle Lesson for today. That the great mystery of the Gospel is the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Nevertheless, it's probably hard to imagine if you've been at St. Mark for any length of time, if you've been baptized in this church, if you've received the Lord's Supper at this altar. But as the Magi were gentiles coming into the presence of God, so too are you a gentile coming into the presence of God.

Our presence here and now would have once been unthinkable. Our status as God's children would be laughable. Why? Because we weren't part of God's chosen people. Our Gentile identity made us, frankly, outsiders. Our Gentile identity made it so we don't belong. You see, God chose Abraham and *his* descendants to be His chosen ones. God kept *them* holy and pure and separate from the rest of the nations (the gentiles).

But this nation wasn't just called out for its own purposes. It was called out, as we've said here many times, to be a blessing to the nations. Thus, God did not leave us as outsiders. No, we who ourselves are unexpected guests in the presence of Christ have received God's gracious invitation to come to the font of baptism, to receive the Lord's Supper, to be a part of this fellowship of believers. As Luther writes in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the Small Catechism,

I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He

calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth...

We who were once outsiders, unexpected guests to the table of our Lord, have been brought in...by God's grace are we now The Insiders.

The Community →

So now we've looked at two different groups of people. First, the Magi who were unexpected guests to the home of Jesus but nevertheless, invited in, indeed, drawn in by God through the miraculous sign of the star leading them from the East. Second, we looked at ourselves. We who are present here today are, believe it or not, unexpected guests in the presence of Christ.

Now let's turn our attention to our community. If the Magi, those gentile practitioners of the dark arts, were invited by God to come into the presence of Christ...if we gentiles have been invited, too, through our baptism, what about those in our community? What about those who are far from Christ and His grace and love for them?

What about the self-sufficient leader in the tech industry here in Silicon Valley who has it all? He or she has a good job, financial security, a house, maybe even another one in Tahoe. They have a good retirement plan going. Despite having it all and being on the Inside in so many way, this self sufficient leader is on the outside, outside the presence of Christ because s/he already has it all and thinking, "what could I possibly need from the Christ child? What could Jesus possibly offer me that I don't have already?"

There is nothing about their worldly goods and possessions, their security, their job that makes them insiders in the KofG. Only at God's invitation are they brought in. And through Jesus, God is inviting them in.

Here's another example:

There is a Lutheran church in India which has become a pilgrimage site. Every day but especially on Friday, for some reason which no one entirely knows, hundreds of Hindus come and pray to Jesus there. They are not baptized Christians. They may be part of a movement among Hindus to worship only Jesus, but no one really knows. Most Indian Christians are outcastes and often feel their Christianity is a way of distancing themselves from the caste Hindus who have oppressed them for centuries. They are not happy all the time to see these higher caste people come in. The local pastor just shakes his head. He doesn't understand it, his best guess is that the word has gotten out that prayers to Jesus in this place have power.

What would we make of this? What would we make of this unexpected group of people being invited into our sanctuary and the presence of Jesus?

Or maybe this Insider/outsider divide hits even closer to home.

And what about those who are on the fringes of *our* congregation. What about those of you who might attend every now and again but *they* still see yourselves as outsiders here in this community. Perhaps you don't know the lingo, you don't know everyone - where they're from and how long they've been a member.

The celebration of Epiphany today reminds us of something important. It reminds us that it's God's gracious invitation into the presence of Jesus which makes us insiders in this community.

The Conclusion →

This Epiphany, the journey of the Magi from the East to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem to pay homage to Jesus, it demonstrates how unlikely, how surprising, how unexpected is the Kingdom of God. The invitation into God's presence, the invitation to come before the Christ Child, is open. It's open to all. For all, even the most unlikely, are invited. Amen.