

Matthew 2:1-12 – January 6, 2024

As some of you may know, years ago, before I became a pastor, I spent some time doing audio/video installation. And there was an installation job that I'll never forget. Not for what we were installing – it was a ordinary TV mounted on the wall – but for where we were installing it.

Most of our installations took place in nice buildings. Fancy office conference rooms. Freshly built university classrooms. That sort of thing. But this job was at a library. A small library. And as my coworker and I drove to this library, we began to realize that it was in the worst part of East Cleveland. The poorest, most crime-ridden area in the entire city. A place where violent crimes happened on a daily basis and drug deals were happening on every corner.

And here we were in a sparkling white cargo van, with the words “profession audio/video installation” splashed across the side of it, with a trunk full of very expensive, high end electronics. And, at that moment, we knew that we did not belong there. My partner on the job, who was driving, actually turned to me at one point and said, “I'm going to stop at this red light, but if anyone takes one step towards this van, I'm flooring it.”

Have you ever been in a place like that? A place where you just did not belong? A place where you stuck out like a sore thumb, because you had nothing in common with the people around you? Maybe it was the reverse. You got to an event and realized that all the people around you were much, much wealthier than you. Maybe it was a cultural issue. You traveled to a different country and found yourself surrounded by people speaking a different language and no way to communicate with them.

It is human nature to stay in places where we feel like we belong. Places that are familiar to us. With people we recognize. Events where we are accepted and understood. But in our Gospel lesson for this Epiphany of our Lord, we find the exact opposite happening. We find a lot of people in places where they do not belong.

We have, first, the wise men. Matthew calls them “magi” and only says that they are “from the east.” Which isn't a lot to go off of, but it's something. Magi is actually where we get the terms “magic” and “magician.” But these men didn't do party tricks.

You see, the term “magic” has changed over the centuries. And in the ancient world, a magi was someone who understood the world really, really well. He understood the political world. He understood the natural world. And he understood the supernatural world, or at least his religion's beliefs about it. And using that understanding of the supernatural world, he could supposedly do magical things. Things like reading the stars for hidden wisdom.

The job of a magi was common in the ancient world. Most kings had advisors that served that function. But the term “magi” is one that comes primarily from the region of Babylon and Persia. Both of which are a great distance east of Judea. So that's where we presume these men came from.

Which is interesting in its own right, considering that only a few hundred years prior, a great many Israelites had lived in the region of Babylon and Persia during the years of the exile. How much did these magi know about the Hebrew scriptures? It's impossible to say for sure. But they probably knew at least a little about Judaism.

They also had to know that they didn't belong in Judea. They were Gentiles. Outsiders. Unclean in the eyes of the Jews. They followed a religion that the Jews considered utterly pagan. But they had to follow this star. They had to know what it meant. They had to see this King of the Jews whom God himself had revealed to them. They didn't belong, but they went anyway.

And the first person they go to is another man who doesn't belong: King Herod. Which is ironic. How can the King of Israel not belong in it's capital, Jerusalem? How can the king not belong in his own palace? Well, believe it or not, he really doesn't.

You see, Herod was on that throne not because he had inherited it or because the Jews wanted him to sit upon it, but because the Romans demanded it. The Romans wanted a puppet. Someone they could control and manipulate and who would be obedient to them. Herod was a great candidate. There was just one little problem.

Herod wasn't Jewish. He was an Idumean. From the region directly south of Israel, known in the Old Testament as Edom. Which meant that Herod was not a descendent of Jacob. He was not part of the 12 tribes of Israel. He was certainly not from the house and line of David. No, Herod was a descendant of Esau. He had no business being the King of Israel. And he knew it.

So when these magi show up saying that God has revealed to them that a new King of the Jews has been born, Herod is troubled. Herod is terrified. He knows he's an outsider. He knows he doesn't belong on the throne. He knows he doesn't belong in this palace. But rather than acknowledge this fact and step down, Herod does what he has done to all of his political opponents: He tries to have this new king eliminated by force.

The wise men didn't belong in Judea. Herod didn't belong on the throne. But there's a third person who is somewhere he doesn't belong: Jesus himself. Because Jesus does belong on the throne. He does belong in a palace. He does belong in Jerusalem. But he's not there.

No, Jesus is in the backwater town of Bethlehem. A little farming village out in the country. Known by anyone only because of another great king who was born there – King David – and because of Micah's prophecy about Jesus' birth. He's the son of a poor builder and his wife. A poor family just scraping by, probably waiting until Jesus is old enough to make the trip back to Nazareth. Which is yet another backwater town in the countryside of Galilee.

This is not where the King of the Jews belongs. The wise men certainly know this. They bring him gifts fit for a king in his palace: gold and incense and myrrh. Gifts befitting royalty. Not simple country folk. This is obviously not where they expected to find him. This is not where anyone would expect to find him.

But this is where he chose to come. And these magi, these Gentiles, these pagans, from the east. These are the men whom God has called to worship him. It makes no sense. And yet, it's not the last time when Jesus will be in a place where he doesn't belong, surrounded by people who don't belong with him. No, he'll spend his entire ministry in situations like this.

He won't spend his ministry in the bustling metropolis of Jerusalem. Walking the Temple courts. Hobnobbing with the chief priests and scribes, royalty and nobility. No, he'll spend most of it in Galilee, far from Jerusalem. Surrounded by disciples made up of fishermen and a tax collector and a former zealot. Eating in the homes of tax collectors and prostitutes and other sinners. Healing the poor and the outcast, women and children, Roman soldiers and Samaritan lepers.

And when everything is said and done, he'll go to the place he least belongs: a cross. A cross where he hangs surrounded by two convicted criminals, justly dying for the crimes. As he, the sinless Son of God, dies for sins he didn't commit. As he, the King of the Jews, dies for the sins we committed. He didn't belong on that cross. We do.

The story of Epiphany is the story of people in places they do not belong. Magi in Judea. Herod on the throne. Jesus in poverty, born in sinless flesh to die a sinners death.

But it's also the story of one more person in a place they do not belong: you. Me. All of us. We're all in a place we do not belong. Because we are here. We are sinners worshipping before the throne of God. Invited to to receive the Body and Blood of Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. We don't belong here. But we are invited to be here.

For we have been made children of God. Though we are Gentiles like those wise men who first worshipped Jesus, we have been grafted onto the tree of God's people. Grafted so that those who don't belong can receive the gifts of those who do belong. The gifts of God's love, God's grace, God's forgiveness, God's eternal life.

Being in a place you don't belong is hard. It's frightening. But you don't need to worry about whether you belong here. God has lit a star for you. To guide you to this place. Where you may worship before our Lord. And receive the gifts that he has for you. Amen.