

Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2018
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Holy Thresholds

So the nativity scene is finally complete. The magi—or wise men—as we have come to know them are in place. All is calm; all is bright. We like—or I should say, I like this whole scene tied up neatly with a bow. Granted, my house is in a bit of disarray, the needles are falling off our tree in piles, and Christmas carols sound a bit off, but there is something right and fitting that the magi—like Joseph—get their due this year. January 6, Epiphany, the finale of the twelve days of Christmas finally falls on a Sunday, and we happen to be in the gospel of Matthew this year—the only gospel that even mentions the magi, so it all lines up so nicely, *they* line up so nicely, so neat and pretty. At least here everything is nice and tidy, just as it should be...until I actually read the text. [Read Matthew 2:1-12]

There is very little here that is nice or neat or tidy. The magi are not kings, but likely Zoroastrian priests, foreigners whose gifts for reading the stars would be treated with suspicion by many. These gentiles, outsiders to the Jewish faith have traveled a great distance to worship a Jewish king and naively ask Herod for directions. Herod is the reigning Jewish king, but his claim to the throne of David is tenuous at best. He is not a descendant of David. He does not know the stories of the traditions. His hold on power is only as secure as his being in good graces with the Roman Empire. The text tells us that he and the whole of Jerusalem are rattled by the magi's questions and threatened by the mention of a newborn king. Later in this chapter he will resort to killing children to maintain his hold on power, and the holy family will wind up as refugees in a foreign land. The text wants to make it clear that Herod will go to any length to maintain control, to preserve the status quo. Those in power are often quite fond on the status

quo. *Their* house is in order; the wheels of the empire spin quite nicely for them. They are not eager to have anyone make them consider another option or another way.

So all is not right or neat or tidy. The powers that be are on edge. Herod panics and calls together all of the brains he can find, and they proceed to tell him what they know, what the faith community has known for centuries. The new king will be born not in Jerusalem in the political heart of things, but in a small village of the beaten path, without much fanfare. Herod then asks to meet with the magi in secret. One step across the palace threshold and it once again becomes clear: very little good comes from fear-driven, secretive meetings behind closed doors. Herod tries to woo them, then he commands them to find this child king and report back his location so that he, too can go and honor him. The magi do as he says. They find Jesus and his mother. They cross another threshold to enter the house where these others are, and they bow down and worship the Christ child. And then they listen to a different voice in a dream that tells them to find another way home, to circumvent Herod and his fear-filled, angry ways.

Maybe your ears perked up at one detail in the story: “They entered the house.” Jesus is not in the stable, no longer away in a manger but in a house. Scholars believe that some time has passed since the birth. Since Bethlehem is Joseph’s family’s hometown, he would likely have been able to find them a place to stay with extended family. But something else is afoot here, too, it seems. There is a stark contrast between this ordinary house and Herod’s house in Jerusalem. To cross Herod’s threshold is to be invited into a fortress buttressed by fear, anger, jealousy, and power grabs; to enter the house where Jesus is is to enter into hope and be overcome with joy. One is marked by abuse of power and privilege; the other is marked by rejoicing and love. Which one would you rather visit? In which one would you prefer to make yourself at home?

You have no doubt noticed the strange letters over the doors of the sanctuary. Maybe you had a chance to read the explanation in the bulletin. For centuries, churches throughout the western world have carried on the practice of chalking the doors to mark Epiphany. The numbers reflect the year and the letters are both the initials of the traditional names of the wise men *and* the first letters of the Latin phrase: *Christus mansionem benedicat* which means, “May Christ bless the house.” We have chalk for you to take with you if you like, along with a prayer for each household on bookmark sized cards. The prayer reads:

May all who come to our home this year rejoice to find Christ living among us; and may we seek and serve, in everyone we meet, that same Jesus who is your incarnate Word, now and forever. Amen.¹

This ritual, this practice marks the house and those who live there. These letters declare to those who pass by that this is a home that pledges to welcome, that to cross that threshold is to enter a household that seeks to serve Christ and to make his presence felt within these walls. But the prayer does not center on Christ being solely within the walls of the house with chalk over its doors: “May we seek and serve in everyone we meet, that same Jesus, who is your incarnate Word.” In other words, in praying that prayer we ask God to shape our vision and our very lives to look for and expect to meet Christ on the other side of every threshold, in the eyes of every person we encounter, and behind the walls of every place we go. Like the wise men, we begin the year with the task of seeking Christ, giving thanks that Christ has sought us, continues to seek us, and in fact meets us in the most ordinary of places and people.

Chalk will fade, of course. Come March, I’m guessing the numbers and letters we write will be long washed or dusted away. But the mark stays. In our baptism, we are marked as God’s

¹ This prayer and others can be found here: <http://liturgy.co.nz/epiphany-chalk-house-blessing-3>

own, as Christ's beloved sisters and brothers. The water dries but the claim remains, as does the call on us to seek and see Christ in others, regardless of race, religion, orientation, wealth, power, nation, or gender. Too often we trip over thresholds and refuse to see the image of Christ in others. Too often we set up our own thresholds to trip others up. Too often we forget that thresholds are made for crossing. Too often we forget that we are called to follow the Christ who crossed the one threshold we cannot on our own. "The Word became flesh and lived among us," another gospel tells us.² Or as one translation reads, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."³ In Christ the divine becomes human, moves into our neighborhoods and our homes and our lives, miraculously crossing that threshold between human and divine to show us what it means for God to so love the world.

And Christ does not wait for us to get everything neat and tidy, thank goodness; he does not care that the baseboards are dusty or that the Christmas wrapping paper has yet to be put away or that the budget is blown. He is not daunted by our anger, stubbornness, power grabs, insults, or fear. He knows that the magic of the season has not healed every broken relationship or mended every wounded heart. And still he comes. The birth of the Christ child occurs in the midst of a world where despots cling to power and pregnant peasants are shuffled off to give birth in an outpost of a greedy empire. In Christ, we meet the God who sits at table with anyone and everyone, the God who welcomes children and challenges the mighty. In Christ, God makes it clear that no barrier is too tall, no wall too strong, no threshold too menacing for the redeemer of the world to make his way in.

So, come and worship, go and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² John 1:14, NRSV

³ John 1:14, The Message