

Can You Imagine It! -- Matthew 2:1-12

January 4, 2015, Norwalk Christian Church, Year B, 2nd Sunday after Christmas, Feast of the Epiphany Observed

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the beginning of the season of Epiphany, this time on the Christian calendar between Christmas and Lent, where we focus on the appearance of God into the world. Epiphany means “appearing”, and during this time, we usually begin by focusing on the light of Christ, shining in the East, directing the Gentiles to Bethlehem.

I was surprised to see that our Little Tykes nativity scene, the nativity that the children can touch as much as they want, came with the Holy Family, along with camels, sheep, and the three Wise Men, but there are no shepherds. Wise Men, but no shepherds?

If you remember from our Children’s Christmas Pageant almost a month ago, Melissa Webb’s character was a little allergic to the idea of the Wise Men and Women appearing at the side of the Bethlehem manger. It made her sneeze!

We often mess with the details of this story, but this morning, as Matthew tells us of these Wise visitors, we are no longer in the stable and it’s no longer Christmas Eve. We are in a house, and some time has passed from the birth.

But even when we get the details of this story right, it still makes me sneeze. What a strange story! Wise Men from the East...which Matthew’s readers would immediately know meant *Gentiles*. Gentiles, visiting the newborn King of the Jews.

Why are they looking for a newborn king in the first place? And how did they find out about this birth, but from the least Jewish way possible, by studying the stars--astrology, a practice forbidden in Jewish law. It’s very strange, so strange that some have suggested Matthew imagined the story, creating this tale to give story to the wide-reach that the coming of Jesus will have. If you’re not sneezing at this story, you should be.

After all, King Herod certainly was. Matthew tells us that when this tyrannical king heard the Wise Men explain their journey, he was terrified and all Jerusalem with him. The arrival of the Wise Men sets off alarms from the start.

The preacher Thomas Long tells the story of a church he knows who has an annual “live nativity pageant”. As Long tells it, “One year, the men who were playing the role of the Magi borrowed a thurible, an incense-burning censer, from the Catholic parish in town. The idea was that as they trekked across the lawn toward the manger, these mysterious Magi from the East would surround themselves with a fog of incense to add to the exotic quality of their appearing.

“So the wise men gathered in the fellowship hall, waiting for their cue. Just before the moment arrived, they lit the incense and got it burning properly. Unbeknown to them, though, they managed to trigger the church’s fire alarm, which sent an automatic signal to the local fire department.

“As they walked toward the manger, each bearing a gift for the newborn Jesus, they were astonished to see yellow-slickered firemen unrolling fire hoses across the church lawn and mingling in a scene of confusion with the shepherds, angels, and goats. Ultimately, the fire chief spotted the burning incense pot, put two and two together, and announced in a loud voice heard by all, “You %#@& wise men are setting off alarms all over town!”

Thomas Long surmises that, “Somewhere in the Great Beyond, the original Magi smiled in approval, remembering that they, too, had set off alarms all over town.”¹

Maybe we should follow the reading of this story with alarms and sneezing, and all kinds of surprise. But the most shocking thing of all, is that these wise men, whomever they were and wherever they are from, seek out Jesus. There is no good reason why people like this would show up to see Jesus!

Pretty much every study produced these days about church attendance and culture suggests that people aren’t seeking out Jesus anymore. Or at least, if they are, they aren’t doing so by showing up at church.

You may remember that we have formed a church Vision Team, and over the last few months of 2014, we’ve looked at some of these studies. Everytime I log into Facebook, it seems, someone else has written or shared another article, diagnosing the great problems facing the church today.

Why aren’t people coming to church like they used to? Some say it’s because of the music. Others because of the lack of young adult programing. Some say visitors don’t stick around because we make them stand up...others say it’s because we don’t pay enough attention to our visitors. Many studies suggest that church is just too boring or too fake or too focused on money or too irrelevant to the problems of real life.

Most of the studies say that those who have given up on church have done so, not because of us--the local church--per se, and the things we do or don’t do, but because of the faith in general. Christianity is too judgmental. Christians read the Bible too literal. It’s too mixed with politics. Faith does not leave room for scientific discovery.

The book our Vision Team is reading together suggests that Sunday morning church is simply losing out to Sunday brunch, football and the chance to sleep-in on the day off.

¹ Thomas Long, “Setting Off Alarms”, <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-12/setting-alarms>

With little effort, I bet we could all come up with our own long lists of reasons-- and most of them good--why people do not come to church anymore, searching for Jesus.

I suppose Matthew could have done the same, listing all the reasons why Wise Men like these would never follow a star to seek out this newborn baby king. Who could imagine such a thing?! It is, indeed, alarming.

But maybe that's Matthew's point. Nothing about this birth should be normal. Matthew tells us this story, real or imagined--it doesn't matter--of Wise Men from the East, the least likely Christ-seekers in the world, scaring the heck out of Herod, as they show up in Jerusalem searching for Jesus. It is meant to be alarming.

So, it's the New Year, a time for making resolutions, and I have one of my own. I'm not reading these church studies anymore. I'm done contemplating the reasons why people aren't going to church. No more focusing on all the problems of Mainline Christianity, what our churches should or should not be doing, as we make judgments against those who are not here.

Instead, I resolve to follow Matthew's lead and have a little imagination. Regardless of trends and demographics, cultural shifts and popular perception, can I--can we--imagine people flocking from the least imaginable places, seeking out Jesus?

Maybe the only real problem facing church today is that we're so fixated on problems and the past that we've given up on our imagination. These Gospel stories beg us to imagine in our day, here and now, what it would look like for Jesus to be born in our world.

Who is flocking to see the newborn king? Whose nights are interrupted by angelic chorus and unusual lights in the night sky? Who's lives are forever changed by Jesus, forced to travel home by a new way?

Can we imagine people, looking for hope in the midst of a pessimistic world, too stressed and depressed for hope? Can we imagine people seeking generosity, in spite of a 24/7 news cycle that pushes greed and fear of the other?

Can we imagine people seeing your life shining bright in your workplace, in your school, all about town, and inquiring about the joy you carry within? Can we imagine Jesus still drawing people from East and West, North and South, and all the unlikely corners of our world, in spite of all the barriers our culture and our churches put in the way?

Can you imagine our church setting off alarms all over town, because of what Jesus is doing in our midst, and who Christ is drawing into our midst? It doesn't take a lot of planning and strategy. Just an imagination that asks, if Jesus is alive in our world today, what could be possible?

As the angel said to Mary, after delivering the impossible news of Christ's birth: With God, all things are possible.