

Epiphany C, 2013

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: Rejoice Exceedingly with Great Joy

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The greatest expression of joy found anywhere in the whole Bible, is right here, in our Gospel lesson today. Matthew says that the Magi, “Rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” Not only did they rejoice. Not only did they rejoice exceedingly. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Their joy overflowed. There was no way to contain their joy.

Think of the most joyful moment in your life. Maybe it was your wedding day, or when your child was born. Maybe it was when you graduated. Maybe it was when your team won the big game. Maybe it was on a special trip where you had a mountaintop experience. Maybe you just went out with your friends and had a really great time.

Think of that wonderful, overflowing experience of joy, the kind of joy you just can’t contain. The kind of joy that brings a smile or a shout to your lips, that makes you want to literally jump for joy and tell everyone who will listen about your good news.

That’s the kind of joy the Magi experience. That’s rejoicing exceedingly with great joy.

So what made the Magi feel this way? What was the source of their joy?

It’s odd when you consider when the Magi rejoice. It’s not when they arrive at the house in Bethlehem. It’s not when they find Jesus. It’s not when they kneel down and worship him, when they give him their precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

When do the Magi rejoice? They rejoice when they see the star. They rejoice before they even see Jesus. You would think that they would wait. You’d think that they would wait to be absolutely sure they had the right house before they rejoice. But when they see the star, they know, even before they see Jesus, that they are in the right place.

Their first stop had been in the wrong place. They not only went to the wrong house, they wound up in the wrong city. How did they end up in the wrong place? How did they get so lost?

Well, to answer that question, you need to know a little bit about Magi, who they are and what they do.

Magi are not kings. “We Three Kings” is a nice song, but it’s wrong. Your nativity sets that have crowns on the magi are nice, but they’re wrong, too. Magi aren’t kings. Magi are servants of kings. They are royal advisors, councilors to kings, members of the king’s cabinet. They are there to guide the king by interpreting dreams or by looking at the stars, the sorts of things that Daniel did in Babylon or Joseph did in Egypt.

And when these Magi looked at the stars, they saw one star that told them that a very special king had been born in Judea, the Jews had a new king. And so they went to find this king, to serve this king, to worship this king and present him with gifts.

Now if you're looking for a king, where's the best place to look? Where do you expect to find a king? In a palace, of course. That's where you find kings. If someone has been born to be a king, you expect his parents to be the current king and queen, and he would be the next in line.

And so it's only natural for the Magi to come to Jerusalem, to look there at the palace for the newborn king of the Jews.

But they're in the wrong place at the wrong time.

When's the last time you showed up at the wrong place or the wrong time? I can remember my first year at the seminary, the president of the seminary and his wife had a reception in the fall for all the new students. I was planning to go, I assumed at least the food would probably be pretty good. I thought I had another couple hours before it started, but I met one of my friends walking across campus who told me that it was starting right then. So I just figured I had the wrong time and we went over together. We got there and sure enough the reception had already started and so we found some refreshments and grabbed a seat to relax. As we looked around the room, we saw that all the other guys were there with their wives, and none our other single friends were there. Finally, we asked someone it and turns out that the first time slot was for the married students and the single students were supposed to come later. When my friend had asked someone else what time it started, he asked a married student, and so he got the time wrong. It was a little embarrassing, but in the end it was not a big deal. The lesson was that we should have checked the invitation to know what time to show up.

The Magi showed up in the wrong place at the wrong time. There's no newborn king in Jerusalem. Herod is the king, and he doesn't have any newborn sons around. And Herod is the kind of king who is terribly insecure. He's always worried that someone will try to take his throne. He had two of his own sons killed when he suspected them of plotting against him.

So when the Magi show up, looking for a newborn king, it's not just embarrassing, it dangerous. Herod could have killed them on the spot, but instead he tried to trick them into leading him to the new king.

The only way for the Magi to get back on track is to turn to God's word, and find His promises. Even though the Magi assumed that the king would be in Jerusalem, the big mighty capital city, God's Word said it would be in Bethlehem, the small, humble city of shepherds. Because they followed their own ideas, they got lost, they got off track.

This morning we will be installing the servants and leaders of the congregation for the coming year. Our temptation will be to rely on our own thoughts and ideas about what is best for this congregation. But apart from God's Word, we'll end up as lost as the Magi. We may think that we've got all the answers on how to move the congregation forward, but on our own, we'll just keep making wrong turns.

This is why it is vitally important for all of you, the leadership of our congregation, to listen carefully to God's Word for direction. It starts here every week in the Divine Service as we hear God's Word read and preached, it continues after church as we gather together to read and study God's Word, and it continues at home in your private devotions. That is where we find direction not just for our lives, but for our church. We don't look to the latest marketing gimmicks. We don't worry about what the megachurches out there are doing. We look to God's word for direction and guidance. We do this in our own personal lives, and we do this as a church. Every meeting of every organization, from the elders to the trustees to the altar guild to the Ladies Aid to the choir to the voters assembly, every meeting flows from God's Word. God sets the agenda. We don't just say a prayer or do a devotion and then move on to other business, but all the business we conduct as a church comes from what God tells us in His Word. He sets the agenda.

And the Magi not only had God's Word, but they had the star. The star was a physical, visible sign from God. God gave them both his Word and the visible sign. Have you ever wanted to see a sign from God? There it is. On the altar. The body and blood of Jesus for you in the bread and the wine, real physical signs of God's presence with you.

Have you ever looked for God's guidance and direction in your life? Don't look to the stars, don't find your horoscope in the paper. Look to the altar. Look to the sacrifice of Jesus. See Him giving His life for you, and follow his direction. Follow His lead. The leaders being installed today should look to the altar for direction, look to the Jesus who gives His life for the world, who sheds His blood for those who persecute Him, who forgives and loves all. That is your guidance in how to be a leader in this congregation, in your family, and in your community.

So you have word and sign, and with the Magi you have joy. You rejoice exceedingly with great joy along with them. Even before you see Jesus face to face. Even on this side of eternity you have incredible, overflowing joy. You have God's Word. You have the sacrament, the sign of His presence, so rejoice.

Some of you whether you're on your way up to the altar, here at the rail on your way back to your seat, you don't show much joy. Now I know that you're a bunch of Lutherans who don't get very emotional. I know that you're taught to be reverent and respectful. But today, this morning, I give you permission to smile. To be joyful. To rejoice exceedingly with great joy. You can be reverent and respectful and still be joyful.

You have found Jesus, the one you have been looking for. He has led you here by His Word and by His sacred signs. Rejoice. Exceedingly. With great joy.

And let your joy overflow into your life around you. Don't be afraid to let other people see your joy and ask you what in the world you're so happy about. There's a lot of lost people out there, who have taken wrong turns, who have gotten bad directions. Point them back to God's word and His signs, so that they may know the same joy that you have in Jesus Christ.