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Matthew 2:1–12

They were the magi. Magicians. Interpreters of divine mysteries. Ancient scientists who searched the night sky for meaning.

Matthew calls them wise men, but he doesn't tell us how many there were, and he certainly never calls them kings. Tradition decided there were three because three gifts were brought. But that is tradition found in hymns and pageants, not in Scripture.

What Matthew *does* tell us is that these star-gazing wanderers play a small but crucial role in the story. And the truth they reveal about Jesus may make us a little uncomfortable. They stretch our theology. They test our assumptions. They push the boundaries of who belongs in God's story.

And none of that is their fault.

There is a familiar Christian slogan: *"Wise men still seek Jesus."* Today we might say wise women too. But even if that is true, the more difficult question is this: what happens when they find him?

The odd thing is that the magi were not seeking Jesus at all. They were reading the sky. And according to their calculations, something significant had happened in Jerusalem. A new king, perhaps. A shift in power. A cosmic interruption.

They arrive in Bethlehem and respond the way they know how. They offer homage appropriate for royalty. Gold for kingship. Frankincense for priestly devotion, incense rising like prayer. And myrrh, the oil used in burial, anticipating suffering and death.

They understand the weight of the moment. They grasp the scope of this child's life and calling.

And then they leave.

Matthew offers no evidence of conversion. No baptism. No renunciation of astrology or magic. No indication they joined the community of Israel or became disciples of Jesus. They simply return home by another road, avoiding Herod because they suspect—correctly—that his interest in the child is not worship but violence.

Their choice is political as much as spiritual. They refuse to cooperate with brutality. And then they disappear from the story.

Which leaves us with questions.

What did they say when they got home?
Did the encounter change them?
Was this just another spiritual experience to add to the collection?
Another insight gathered and then set aside?

Did they stop searching for God because they believed they had found God in Bethlehem? Or did they keep wandering, still looking?

Matthew does not tell us. And perhaps that silence is intentional.

I want to believe they were more than spiritual tourists, more than collectors of exotic experiences. I want to believe their search had depth and integrity. But the text gives us no certainty.

And that uncertainty feels very familiar.

We encounter it today in people who describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." People who search for God on their own terms, in their own ways.

An article by American preacher Lillian Daniel has been circulating widely among clergy. It has a deliberately provocative title: **"Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me."**

In it, Daniel critiques self-constructed spirituality that makes few demands and resists accountability. She pokes fun at well-worn claims like finding God in sunsets, beaches, or mountaintops—as though religious traditions had never noticed creation's beauty before.

She writes that private spirituality asks very little of us. It doesn't challenge us. It doesn't require us to wrestle with difficult people, uncomfortable truths, or inconvenient commitments.

In a later interview, she put it this way: religious tradition should act like sandpaper against a culture constantly asking, *"How can this meet my needs?"* Faith, she says, should cost us something. Anyone can find God in a sunset. Finding God in the woman sitting next to you whose baby cries through the sermon—that takes grit.

I understand her frustration.

Those of you who gather week after week, who pray and sing and give, who show up when it is hard and stay when it would be easier to leave, might feel insulted when centuries of theological reflection are brushed aside in favour of a casual spirituality with no roots and no obligations.

You whohave holy dirt under your fingernails. You who have lived the gospel, not just admired it from a distance.

And yet.

In my work, I meet many people who distrust institutional religion but still hunger for meaning. Often they want affirmation from me as a pastor, even when their beliefs contradict the Christian story entirely.

If I disagree, I am accused of imposing religion. But the irony is that they expect unquestioned agreement from me, just as firmly as they reject it from the church.

Those conversations can be frustrating. Sometimes even insulting.

But over time, I have wondered whether the rise of self-created spirituality is less about arrogance and more about injury.

People watched churches deny communion to their gay siblings. They heard preachers equate doubt with disobedience. They saw Christians fight over symbols and privileges while ignoring suffering. They were wounded by institutions that claimed to speak for God.

And wounded people wander.

When faith is experienced as harm, independence can feel safer than belonging.

Which brings us back to the magi.

These outsiders—non-Jewish, non-religious, non-orthodox—understand something essential about Jesus. Their gifts proclaim his identity more clearly than many insiders ever will.

And then they leave.

They do not stay. They do not convert. They do not become disciples.

And God uses them anyway.

God places them at the centre of the Epiphany story not as a mistake or a footnote, but as a revelation. God's light reaches beyond the boundaries we would draw. God's purposes are not limited to those who get all the theology right.

God remains faithful to them, whether or not they return the favour.

That realization has changed how I see the world beyond our church doors. I no longer panic when Christianity seems ignored or

dismissed. God is not anxious. God's mission is wider than the church and deeper than our control.

God uses people who do not name God.
God works through people who resist religion.
God advances justice and healing through those who may never step inside a sanctuary.

In our Lutheran tradition, we have language for this. We call it **the left hand of God**—God's work in the world beyond explicit faith language. Laws that protect the vulnerable. Movements that pursue justice. Communities that choose compassion without religious vocabulary.

The expansion of LGBTQ rights is one clear example. Long before many churches affirmed their LGBTQ members, civil society pushed forward human dignity and protection. Many of us eventually recognized this not as a threat to faith, but as God at work ahead of us.

God moved. And the church followed.

That is humbling. And it is hopeful.

And this is the gospel we proclaim:

That the child the magi found is not only a sign in the heavens, but God-with-us in the flesh.

That Jesus grew, taught, healed, forgave, challenged empires, welcomed the excluded, and loved without limit.

That he was crucified by fear and power, and raised by a love stronger than death. That in him God has begun the renewal of all things.

Sin does not get the last word. Death does not win. Despair is not final. The light shines, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

This is our hope. This is our joy. This is our Lord.

Our calling has not changed. But it has been clarified.

We are not here to guard the past.
We are here to proclaim God's promised future.

We shine—not by controlling the light, but by letting God's light shine through us.

We tell God's story.
We pray for the world's pain.
We live as people who believe resurrection is stronger than death.

And as we do, those who once walked by another road may find themselves drawn closer—not by coercion, but by light.

This is Epiphany.
The God who shines in the darkness.
The God who will not be contained.
The God who draws all people into love.

May we shine with that light.
May it warm what is cold.
Heal what is wounded.
And illuminate even the darkest corners of the world.

May it be so among us.
Amen.