

## Sermon: Doing it the Easy Way

Year B, Epiphany

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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There's a question I'm dying to ask, but I don't know how to ask it without sounding completely judgmental. I tell someone I'm a minister and they blink and say something along the lines of "I'm spiritual, not religious." What does that even mean? I just don't get it. If they told me they were right-handed, not left, that I would get. If they told me they were from New England, not the Midwest, that I would get. But what does "spiritual not religious" even mean? Those two words are not mutually exclusive.

If they were telling me that they were Jewish or Muslim or Ba'hai or Buddhist or whatever, it would make sense to me that they weren't attending a Christian church. I get it. You don't take a Volkswagen to a Ford dealership. But that's not what they're telling me. I think "spiritual but not religious" means they have an experience of God in this world, but they don't have that experience in church.

Since you guys have all managed to wander into this Christian church at roughly the same time, I'll give you a pro tip. An epiphany is the experience of God in this world.<sup>1</sup> The Epiphany is the experience the non-Jewish wise men had in Bethlehem when they found Mary and the Christ child.<sup>2</sup> So as far as I can make out, apparently the wise men were spiritual but not religious. It's just that they don't meet anyone's definition of spiritual but not religious.

Why not? Well, let's look at what we've learned just from this little passage in Matthew. We don't actually know how many of them there are. We think there are three because there are three gifts, but Matthew never says how many there are. He uses the plural, so more than one, but we don't know how many more. He calls them *magoi* a word whose meaning changes over time, but our best guess is that it means men who belong to a priestly class who came from Persia,<sup>3</sup> modern day Iran.

So why aren't these guys spiritual but not religious. Well, first, they had been studying.<sup>4</sup> They looked at their history and saw that the divine sent signs to human kind periodically. Whatever else they had learned, they had learned that their own past and their sacred texts told them that signs appeared.

Second, they hadn't just stuck with their books. They observed the world around them in great, earnest detail.<sup>5</sup> They knew what the sacred texts said about the world and they believed that the divine showed up in this world so you had to look for it. Without that combination, they would have missed Jesus all together.

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<sup>1</sup> William V. Arnold "Epiphany of the Lord, Pastoral Perspective, Matthew 2:1-12" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 212.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold, 212.

<sup>3</sup> Sherman E. Johnson, "The Gospel According to St. Matthew: Exegesis," vol. 7 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1951), 257.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold, 212.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, 212.

Third, they were willing to put themselves in motion based on their beliefs.<sup>6</sup> They sought confirmation of what they believed. They were willing to invest time and shoe leather, or whatever it is when you travel by camel, to find out if they were right. And they were willing to risk being proven wrong.

Fourth, they were willing to bring in other resources that might be more knowledgeable about what they were observing.<sup>7</sup> Part of how we know the wise men were not Jewish is that they had to ask where the King of the Jews might be found. Anyone raised as a Jew would know that the offspring of David would be in David's city, Bethlehem.<sup>8</sup> Now, asking Herod about where the real king of the Jews was probably ranks as one of their more foolish moves. It's amazing he didn't have them killed where they stood.<sup>9</sup> But they pull in other resources.

Fifth, having had their convictions confirmed, meaning they found the child with Mary in Bethlehem, they responded in gratitude.<sup>10</sup> Lots of gratitude. Gold, frankincense and myrrh gratitude. Abundant, generous, expensive gratitude. Which they had brought with them<sup>11</sup> because they wanted to be ready in case they succeeded in confirming what they believed.

Sixth, having seen the child, having had all their hopes realized, they remain vigilant and attentive.<sup>12</sup> They are open to further visions and insight. And because they were so open, they heard the warning that they got in their dreams. And they went safely home by another way.

Seventh, they did all this, studying, observing, travelling, asking for help, offering gratitude, remaining open to further vision, they did all this as a group. Think about what it took to get your family from your home to this church this morning. How much easier would it have been to do that as an individual?

What does it take to do all those things, to get two or three or five people out the door on time to make it to church at all? What does it take to move wise men from Iran to Israel by camel carrying precious gifts? It takes discipline. It takes practice. It takes work.

Do I feel the presence of God when I walk in the woods? I do. Does it fill me with a sense of peace, a sense of connectedness, a sense of being a part of something larger? It sure does. I think that is the kind of epiphany the spiritual but not religious people are talking about.

So, given all that, this is the question I want to ask them. I want to ask the spiritual but not religious crowd if they would like to feel that when their flight is delayed at the airport? When they are the only ones home when a Nor'easter comes roaring up the coast and they have to do all the shoveling? When they lose a job? When they lose a loved one?

Anyone can improvise a feeling of the divine when they are walking at the beach. I think you'd have to be kind of spiritually dead not to. But whatever that feeling is, however you describe it or experience it, it seems to me we are creatures who are built to crave that feeling, that

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<sup>6</sup> Arnold, 214.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold, 214.

<sup>8</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*. Vol. 1. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 24.

<sup>9</sup> James C. Howell, "Epiphany of the Lord, Theological Perspective, Matthew 2:1-12" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008], 214.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold, 214.

<sup>11</sup> Howell, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold, 214.

experience. The reading from Matthew, the account of The Epiphany, The Experience of Jesus as God in this World, is there for a reason.

It takes discipline to find the Christ Child. You have to go out of your way. You have to be prepared to express gratitude. You have to ask for help. It will change your life. It will put you on another road. It will take all the life experiences you have, as a magi, a musician, a computer programmer, a parent, a daughter. It will take everything you have, everything you know, everything you are to find the Christ Child. And once you find Jesus, you keep finding Jesus. In Bethlehem. In Hannafords. In your own TV room, doing homework.

This is what I want to ask the “spiritual but not religious” people. Why do you want to do it the hard way? Why do you want to keep God as some exotic treat for the one day a year you manage to get to the mountain top all by yourself? The discipline it takes to bring God into your life is so, so much easier than suffering along without God and then having a sublime experience every now and again just to remind yourself how much you enjoy having God in your life and how brittle your life is without God the rest of the time. So stop pursuing an epiphany and start following The Epiphany. It’s the presence of God in your life all the time, with other people. It’s so much easier.