

Meadowbrook Congregational Church
“Jumping on the Bandwagon”
January 4, 2009
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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’*

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

How many Detroit Lion fans do we have here this morning? Does anyone even dare to admit it? 0 and 16! Wow, quite impressive! I’m not a big professional football fan but I have taken a lot of grief this week from my out-of-town friends. I guess that living in Detroit we just have to accept it. We can’t walk around with a bag over our heads for fifty years!

I know that being a Detroit Tiger fan isn’t always easy. A few years ago, right after the Tigers lost nearly 120 games, the girls and I were shopping at a mall in Salt Lake City and I came upon a kiosk with a rack of ties displaying the logos of major league baseball teams. I glanced through them looking for my beloved Tigers. I saw the Yankees, the Red Sox, the Dodgers, the Cubs- even the Pirates and the Athletics. But sadly I did not see the Tigers. I decided to bring this oversight to the attention of the clerk. He was positive that he had a Detroit Tiger tie somewhere, so positive that after a fruitless search through his inventory, he decided to call a neighboring store. While he was on the phone, I noticed that he was glancing at my Detroit Tiger jacket, Detroit Tiger cap, and Detroit Tiger shirt. A smile began to press his lips. I could tell something was on his mind. Finally he said to me, “You’re a Detroit Tiger fan, huh? I guess there is a lot of room on that bandwagon!” Needless to say, he couldn’t find a Detroit Tiger tie in any store.

Every twenty years or so I am surprised at how many Detroit Tiger fans there really are. That is how often the Tigers seem to seriously contend for a pennant. At those times I resent the fair weather fans who take up space on the bandwagon, celebrating that which I painfully await for years and years. That sales clerk spoke a bit of the truth that day. There is one advantage to your team losing. At least you have them all to yourself!

I once heard from a colleague who said that he used his Christmas Eve sermon to chastise those who ride the Christmas bandwagon. Evidently he had grown quite resentful of the fact that many in his church attended worship only once a year, on Christmas Eve. He was angry that these virtual strangers would dare to enter the church and sing Christmas carols with the same piety of the meager but faithful who sat through sermons all year long. And so he lashed out, trying to make those bandwagon riders feel guilty. I never heard if his sermon worked but I would venture to guess that there were less people attending services at his church the following Christmas Eve.

This week is the observance of Epiphany, the close of the Christmas season. As we look around, things are a lot different here than they were on Christmas Eve. The poinsettias are wilted or gone. The candles have burned down. We will be putting the decorations away soon. The level of excitement and anticipation has lessened. The crowd is down significantly. Most people don't know how to pronounce Epiphany much less celebrate it. In many ways, we gather as a faithful remnant today. The popularity of Christmas is over. Now there's just you and I and the baby Jesus. The bandwagon has a lot more room today. And maybe deep down inside, that's the way we like it.

According to the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus was born, magi came from the East to worship him. Who were these men? They probably were not wise men as we tend to label them. And they definitely were not kings or rulers. They were probably magicians, astrologers, wizards, or stargazers. Perhaps the gifts they brought to the baby Jesus- gold, frankincense, and myrrh, were tricks of their trade, elements used to create their magic. But we know for certain that these men were not Jews. They were Gentiles, strangers who practiced a magic that was condemned in Hebrew scripture. On the few occasions where the magi were mentioned in Scripture, it was usually with an unfavorable light. These men who first came to the baby Jesus were not part of the inside crowd but rather were bandwagon riding strangers.

There is a certain amount of shock in understand that fact. The insiders, those faithful to the law and the study of Scripture, missed the birth at Bethlehem. The clergy and the regular worship attendees didn't seem to notice. It was outsiders, people caught in the joy of the moment, people who didn't understand the tradition or who probably didn't know the words to any of the Christmas carols- it was those people who first came to the manger.

By putting these magi at the beginning of the story, Matthew is trying to tell us something about the nature of Jesus. This baby, this newborn Messiah, is not to be our possession. No one can claim the inside track on his love and grace. No one group, no one church, can claim him solely as their own. He is Lord of all, the Savior of the universe. Even though the magi may not have known everything about him and were confused over what his birth might mean, they knew his birth was important and they felt a need to worship him.

Right away in the story of Jesus, those of us who like to think we are on the inside of things get a lesson. There is to be plenty of room on the Jesus bandwagon. Later Jesus would speak of the Kingdom of God as a great banquet to which everyone on the streets would be invited. He would describe the Kingdom of God as a net that when cast, draws in all kinds of fish. Above all he will teach us that the Kingdom of God is a place and an idea that we will never totally own. Just when we think we possess it, we will miss it and get left out. God's grace will be amazing but also confusing.

When we come to the manger to adore and worship the infant Jesus, we may be surprised at who is there before us. Sometimes, those that cluster around the Christ are not the sort of people we expect. They may look at things differently. They may want to do things differently. Their faith journey has taken a different path. But the light that shines in the darkness is for the whole world, not just us. We need to make space on the bandwagon for those who would seek that star.