

“The Wise Men” Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany of Our Lord 2026

A member of one of the congregations asked me recently if I had watched something called “the Best Christmas Pageant Ever”. I hadn’t, and after taking their encouragement, I watched what was an enjoyable Christmas movie. It is the story of a church, which is faced with the drudgery of putting on the Christmas pageant for yet another year. The woman in charge breaks her leg and no one wants to do take it over. It falls to one particular woman who would rather do anything else, but she agrees.

A family named the Herdmans has found their way to Sunday School because they heard there was food there, much to the chagrin of all the other children because the Herdmans were very unpopular. Imogene smoked cigars, Ralph was dirty and unshaven, and they were always fighting with someone.

At the first rehearsal no one wants to volunteer for the part of Mary, Joseph, the Wise men, or the angel of the Lord. It was always the same people who needed to be coerced and they were waiting to be begged. But before that could happen the Herdmans all volunteered. Imogene was to be Mary, Ralph was Joseph, Gladys was the angel of the Lord, and the other brothers the wise men.

This was scandalous. Who ever heard of a cigar smoking Mary an unwashed Joseph? The congregation was in an uproar – all waiting for the pageant to collapse in a fist fight. It was truly scandalous. As the rehearsals unfolded it was necessary to explain the story because the Herdmans knew none of it. How dare the inn keeper refuse them room, didn’t he know it was Jesus. Herod should be taken out. The shiny veneer of the Christmas story dissolved, much to the offence of the congregation. You didn’t say Mary was pregnant in church!

Well the pageant unfolds. Ralph and Imogene were there all right, only for once they didn’t come through the door pushing each other out of the way. They just stood there for a minute as if they weren’t sure they were in the right place – because of the candles, and the church being full of people. They looked like the people you see on the six o’clock news – refugees, sent to wait in some strange ugly place, with all their boxes and sacks around them.

It suddenly occurred to me that this was just the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn’t much care what happened to them. They couldn’t have been very neat and tidy either, but more like this Mary and Joseph (Imogene’s veil was cockeyed as usual, and Ralph’s hair stuck out all around his ears). . . .

Next came Gladys, from behind the angel choir, pushing people out of the way and stepping on everyone’s feet. Since Gladys was the only one in the pageant who had anything to say she made the most of it: “Hey, unto you a child is born!” she hollered, as if it was, for sure, the best news in the world. And all the shepherds trembled, afraid – of Gladys, mainly, but it looked good anyway.

As for ruining the whole thing, it seemed to me that the Herdmans had improved the pageant a lot, just by doing what came naturally – like burping the baby for instance, or thinking a ham would make a better present than a lot of perfumed oil. I almost wished for the pageant to go on, with the Herdmans in charge, to see what else they would do that was different. Maybe the Wise Men would tell Mary about the problem with Herod, and she would tell them to go back and lie their heads off. Or Joseph might go with them and get rid of Herod once and for all.

I was so busy planning new ways to save the baby Jesus that I missed the beginning of “Silent Night”, but it was all right because everyone sang “Silent Night”, including the audience. Now, everyone had been waiting all this time for the Herdmans to do something absolutely unexpected. And sure enough, that was what was happening. Imogene Herdman was crying. In the candlelight her face was all shiny with tears and she didn’t even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there – awful old Imogene – in her crooked veil, crying and crying and crying. But as far as I am concerned, Mary is always going to look a lot like Imogene Herdman – sort of nervous and bewildered, but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby. And the Wise Men are always going to be Leroy and his brothers, bearing ham.

Today we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men to see the one for whom the stars told to look. Imagine exotic foreigners arriving at a barn bearing gifts. Speaking foreign languages to peasants. These were not friendly neighbours speaking gentle English dressed in our father’s bathrobe. A whole new world broke in upon Mary and Joseph. We know the story and skip to the end, in the process sanitizing it from all that would appear

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remarkable or earth shattering. I can only imagine what a similar event would need to be today to represent the same degree of wonder – aliens from a space ship?

We need to recover the wonder of the Epiphany, God being revealed to us in God being born into our world, for the salvation of the world! It is so easy to become like the congregation at the Christmas pageant – Yea! We know the story, get it over with and with as little fuss as possible. Imagine “Hey, unto you a child is born!”

One year in confirmation class I was showing a video about the life of Jesus according to the Gospel of Luke. It was not a particularly well done video, and to be honest we were all getting a little bored. As it drew to a close, mindful of the time and, I guess, wanting to get a few words in before everyone rushed home, I stopped it thinking everyone knew how it ended. You know – the crucifixion and all. One student shouted “Hey, what are you doing?” He was mesmerized by the story of Jesus and couldn’t wait to see how it all ended. Here was a “Herdman” amongst the rest of us. We knew how it all ended, but had lost the power of the story. I went home ashamed.

One of the priorities that I have really tried to encourage this congregation to embrace is “Outreach”. It will require all of us to recover some of the wonder of what God has done for each of us. “Hey, unto you a child is born!” To often we have become like the congregation expecting Wise Men in our father’ bathrobes, and a baby in a clean smelling manger. The Gospel is sanitized to the point of losing all offense but also all grace and wonder.

I have seen any number of people walk into our churches looking for “this baby – this Jesus who promises to give them hope”, only to be turned away by indifference to the message and indifference to this baby. Not intentional, simply that it has become old hat. Others come with the words of the Wise Men, “Where is the child who has been born the King of the Jews? For we have come to pay him homage.” We live, more and more among an alien people who have not heard of Jesus. They get glimpse of Jesus and the hope and go looking. Will we have the words and the welcome to help them pay homage to the one they seek? Will our hope be fresh enough for us to share the good news that here is the one who promises life and hope?

Often we keep out the Herdmans because they are different than us when they may be the ones to help us rediscover the hope that has become old news. We keep them out by our own private vocabulary, our little groups of friends and way of doing things that makes them feel like foreigners who are not welcome.

Christ himself desires this church to make it a priority “to provide an outreach ministry designed to encompass God’s children who are unable to participate, or are not involved or active in the membership of Community.” To do this, we need to

- Demonstrate unconditional love and acceptance for all people, regardless of race, age, ability, etc.
- Minister to people in their times of need
- Create a greater awareness of our church within the larger community
- Acknowledge the lack of attendance / involvement of congregational members and seek to determine their needs

It requires that we renew the awe and wonder of a God who would break into our world. It requires that we look for the Wise Men among us, foreigners who come with awe and wonder at the birth of this child. It requires that we allow the Herdmans among us to rekindle the wonder. Outreach then becomes only natural. We have been chosen to be God’s children and we want more brothers and sisters! Not only those who find there way through our doors, but all those whom we touch each day.

Amen.