

Inside Out
Matthew 2:1–12; Ephesians 3:1–12
Sunday, January 5, 2025

On Tuesday our son Ryan said to me, “I want to go to the Eagles game on Sunday.” If you haven’t been following it, Eagles running back Saquon Barkley is only 100 yards away from setting the NFL record for the most rushing yards in a season. It’s a record that has stood for 40 years, and he was easily going to break that on Sunday against the New York Giants, his former team who got rid of him last season. So this game was going to be a big deal. I said to Ryan, “I don’t know...tickets are going to be pretty expensive, because everyone is going to want to see that.” He said, “I don’t care. I’ve been working and saving money, and I want to buy the tickets.” How could I say no to that?

So I started scouring the internet and found a pretty unbelievable deal on two tickets 17 rows up, right on the 50 yard line. They were still expensive, but nowhere *near* what they should have been. So I got them and texted him a picture of what our view would be from those seats. We were both so excited. We were going to see this once-in-a-lifetime, record-breaking game. That was Tuesday.

On Wednesday, the Eagles announced that Saquon Barkley and all of their other starters would not be playing. The Eagles were already in the playoffs, and it didn’t make a difference whether they win or lose this game, so why risk getting your best players injured in a meaningless game? I totally get it. It makes sense. And we are still going to have a great time together. But he spent a lot of money that he has been saving for months to go watch the backups play. The “B” team. The players who were supposed to be *in* were *out*, and the ones who were supposed to be *out* were *in*.

This *does* actually relate to our story today. Today we celebrate Epiphany. (Epiphany is actually *tomorrow*, the twelfth day after Christmas, but we observe it together *today*.) This is the day when we celebrate the magi (the wise men) coming to find Jesus and bringing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and

myrrh. The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek word *epiphaneus*, which means, “to appear,” or “to reveal.” *That* comes from a word that means, “glorious” or, “glory.” *That* comes from a word that means, “to shine,” “to bring light,” or “to make visible.” So if you put all of that together, *Epiphany* has to do with the coming of light that reveals glory. When someone says, “I had an *epiphany*,” they are saying, “Something that wasn’t clear to me before, I can *see* it now.” It’s about something being *revealed*; the lights come on and you *get it*. Some kind of knowledge is made known to you. A mystery is revealed to you.

And what is being revealed on that first Epiphany 2,000 years ago is the glory of God in Jesus Christ. What is being *made known* in this story is that Jesus is the King of the Jews, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. But here’s the thing. It’s not being revealed to the people on the *inside*, the ones who are *supposed* to get it. It’s being revealed to the people on the *outside*, the ones who *aren’t* supposed to get it. The backups. The “B” team.

There are two main players in this story: King Herod and the wise men. (We don’t actually know how *many* wise men there were. We always sing about *three* of them, but scripture doesn’t actually *say* how many there were. So we’re just going to lump them all together as *one* of the main players in this story.) King Herod was the *insider*. He was the powerful Roman-backed ruler of the region. He was born in Israel, and he was Jewish. He was surrounded by the best advisors and Jewish religious leaders. If there was *anyone* to whom the glory of God should have been revealed, to whom the mystery of the Messiah of Israel should have been made known, it was Herod.

The magi (or wise men) were astrologers who came from the East, probably Persia (what we know today as Iran). Which is to say, they were not from Israel, and they were not Jewish. They were Gentiles. Outsiders. There was no reason they should have *known* or *cared* about the birth of the King of the Jews

or the Messiah of Israel, because they weren't *from* Israel, and they weren't *Jewish*. And yet it is to *them* that the glory of God is revealed, and this mystery is made known.

The one who was supposed to be *in*, King Herod, was watching all of this from the *outside*. And the ones who were supposed to be on the *outside* were the ones who saw Jesus face-to-face.

This is a theme that runs all throughout the life of Jesus. The people closest to him and the ones who *should* have understood who he was *didn't really get* who he was or what he was doing. The Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. His *disciples* didn't get him a lot of the time. His own *mother* and family, there are stories about how they think he's *crazy*, and they come to bring him back home. And yet these *other* people all throughout the gospels – Samaritans, lepers, sinners, Gentiles, Romans, non-Jewish people – *they* seem to get what's going on here. *Their* eyes were opened to the presence and the glory of God in their midst.

This is a theme that Paul picks up on in his letters, too, especially his letter to the Ephesians. Ephesus was a city in Asia Minor (present day Turkey). It was outside of Israel. The people who lived there were not Jewish. They were Gentiles. They were outsiders. And yet *they* had come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul writes to them and says this in Ephesians 3:1–12:

This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in

accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

He says that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to them, and that *they* – Gentiles, outsiders – have become *heirs*, members of the same body, sharing in the same promise as the people of Israel, through Jesus Christ. It used to be that the promise of God, the love and blessing of God, the *kingdom* of God was limited to the Jewish people. Think of it like a city with a wall around it. Only the Jewish people were allowed inside. But in Jesus Christ, the gates to that city have been opened wide, and the whole world has been invited in to share in the promise and the love and the blessing of God *with* the people of Israel. God is not blessing the Gentiles *instead of* Israel. God is blessing them *in addition to* Israel. Through Jesus, the Gentiles are now included in God's covenant with Israel.

The *mystery* that is being revealed in Christ – we see it in Paul and in the story of the wise men – is that those on the “outside” belong to God, are loved by God, and are a part of God's family. Paul says that this has been made known to the Church so that the Church can make it known to the *world*. So that we can proclaim the good news that there are no “outsiders.” The promise and love and blessing of God is for *all* people. Our job is to help others *see* it and *experience* it and *live into it*; not to serve as gate keepers, but to stand at the doors – at the gates to the Kingdom of God – and invite *everyone* in to join the celebration. The calling of the church is to say to the world, “The promise of God is for *you*. The love of God is for *you*. The blessing of God is for *you*. Jesus Christ is *for you*.”

God is revealed to the world today *through* the life of the church. But *not* in a way that says, “We have God and you don't. We're the insiders and you're the outsiders.” God is revealed in us as we live and practice our faith in ways that show *humility* and in ways that make *peace* and work for *justice* and practice *forgiveness* and live in *love*. The glory of God in Jesus Christ is revealed through us when we live the life of Christ in the world.

The question that this asks us is, “Who do *we* think of as being *outside* the love and blessing of God today?” Who in this world and in our lives do we look at and think, “Not them. I don’t see any evidence of the presence or glory of God in *their* life. They are a *mess*, or they believe the exact *opposite* of everything that *I* believe, or they drive me *crazy*, or they’re just a little too *different*, they don’t do things the way that I think they *should* be done, or they’re too *liberal*, or they’re too *conservative*, or they’re *Muslim* or *atheist* or *immigrants* or *poor* or they have an *addiction*.”

Who do we look at today as *outsiders*? Who does the world around us view as being outside the love and blessing of God? Because what Epiphany shows us is that God is actually calling *them* to be a part of this story with us. God is calling us to open our *eyes* and our *minds* and our *hearts* and our *doors* to *them*, so that the glory and love and blessing and presence of Christ can be revealed to them *through us*; so that through *our* love and acceptance, they might come to know *God’s* love and acceptance. This is something that the Transformation Team talked about a lot throughout their process, and it’s something that we’re going to be talking about a lot this year. What does it mean for us to be a *welcoming* church? For us to be oriented not just to our *members* and those who are *here*, but to those who are currently *outside* of this community?

But it’s not just for us as a church, but how can we as individuals open our hearts to someone who is currently on the outside? Someone who doesn’t quite fit in. Someone who doesn’t have many friends, or they’re *lonely*. Was there a time in your life when *you* felt like an outsider somewhere? Maybe you were new at school or at work or even *here*. Maybe you were new in this *country*. Maybe you didn’t feel like you fit in this community. Maybe you were struggling with something, and you just didn’t feel like you really *fit* anywhere because of that. Was there someone who opened up to *you* and welcomed *you* and

made you feel like you *belonged*? That you were *loved* and *cared about*. How did that *feel*? How can you help someone else feel that same way?

As we enter this new year, how will we reach out to those who are thought of as being on the *outside* and welcome them in to the love and blessing and story of God, the way that *we* have been welcomed in through Jesus Christ?