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Matthew 2:1-12  
Epiphany Sunday  
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### The Gift of Being a Misfit

It should not surprise us that the first Sunday of the New Year gives us a text about a few worn-out travelers. I wonder how wise they are. I wonder how wise we are when it comes to our mental and physical health this time of year. It seems that everyone travels over the holidays, everyone goes on some sort of journey. My wife and I are still learning about the mystery of marriage and family life at holiday time. We split the last five days of December between North Carolina and Ohio, and still I don't think all in the extended family were satisfied with our time allotments.

What is it about this time of year that we furiously prepare for Christmas, it finally comes to us who are already exhausted, we take to the highways and byways, we come back a few days later ready to tackle a fresh New Year and rather being rested by our "Vacationing" we are more worn out than ever from our "time away," battling as some might be coughs, sniffles, and sore throats. Perhaps next year for Christmas I'll get what I really want – and I'm guessing all of you – really want, not presents or more shopping or a Rock em' Sock em' New Year's Eve, but a few more hours of quiet time and sleep.

But perhaps that's just not the way the Christmas season is supposed to be. I'd like to tell you that the Bible gives us the rest we need, but it doesn't. The Christ-child is born in Bethlehem and before you can say seven swans a swimming and six geese a laying, we are on to the next scene in this cosmic drama, and we see precisely what Karl Barth meant when he says Christmas begins an uprising against the powers of the world. Matthew throws us into an eternal story of epic heroism, a politically charged religious battle of life and death. Brutal King Herod rightly sensing that another one, a little baby, has been born who will challenge his strong-fisted government, sends these odd wise men, probably astrologers of some kind, on a quest to find the Christ-child. I'm always amazed at how differently the Bible depicts Christmas than how we see it in our homes, or in the world around us.

A friend told me about a Christmas card she had seen on a visit to Palestine. Bethlehem of course is in the West Bank. In the lower right hand corner of the card are the three wise men on camelback, their eyes fixed on the upper left hand corner of the card where the Star of Bethlehem is shining brightly. But this is the modern day Middle East, so right down the middle of the card, between the wise men and the star for which they had traveled so far, is a 30 foot wall, a wall that is snaking its way along the border between the West Bank and Israel.

So much for the notion that religion and politics don't mix. So much for the notion that Christ and the government share the same values. So much for catching up on rest for the New Year, for King Herod's New Year's resolution is to slaughter Mary's infant boy whose tender new-born hands pose a threat to the rule of the government, to Herod's clenched fist. So much for having yourself a Merry Little Christmas.

And into this epic tale of life and death, of good and evil, of light and dark come three minor characters about to play a major role. I love how John Irving describes this in his book, "A Prayer for Owen Meany." In the book, little Owen Meany is furious that the rector of his church plans to leave out the last verse of "We Three Kings" in the annual Christmas pageant. The Church needs to hear the fifth verse, Owen says and then begins to sing loudly, "Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a stone cold tomb." Sounds very Christmasy.

The life of the Christ-Child rests on the unknowing shoulders of Three Wise Men, not religious people at all, but rather weird, misfit, out of the mainstream astrologers, with little to no knowledge of scripture or religious conviction. They just happen to walk across history's stage at the right moment and find their feet scripted into a journey of darkness – a journey illumined by the bright light of God's grace shining in the Eastern sky, shining into their misfit lives.

The Wise Men are sometimes called kings, though they were far from royalty. The Bible doesn't give us all that much to go on. We don't even know how many there were, though tradition tells us there were three based on the three gifts that were brought. My mother sometimes puts a story about the wise men in her kitchen at Christmas. It goes like this.

"You know what would have happened if there had been three wise WOMEN instead of three wise MEN, don't you? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the Baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and given practical gifts." All of which I am sure is true. She had that framed by the way. Every time I read this story I am struck by the fact at how unprepared these Wise Men were to be the ones to fulfill this destiny.

They are often portrayed as bumbling fools of sorts. For one, they are astrologers, and the image we have is of a bleary TV screen sometime past midnight with some odd looking person with too many piercings and exaggerated make-up holding out a fuzzy palm and an 800 number promising love, riches, and happiness to the first ten callers.

They get lost. They are depicted in Christmas pageants wearing funny hats and bathrobes. They just don't fit in and one has to ask the question why in the world would God allow the life of God's own son to rest on the journey of these mis-fit men? And yet the Bible tells story after story about how God uses the misfits of the world to accomplish God's purposes in the world, even non-religious astrologers like these can help bring about God's good work in the world. Ironically, it is these mis-fits who have gifts they bring to the Christ-child.

In JRR Tolkien's the Lord of the Rings, the Hobbit Frodo is the most unlikely candidate to carry the ring to its destruction, and yet he is given the task. The following are Tolkien's words : "I wish I had never seen the Ring," said Frodo. "Why did it come to me? Why was I chosen?" "Such questions cannot be answered," said Gandalf. "You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess; not for power or wisdom, at any rate. But you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and wits as you have." Like Frodo, all of us, in our own unique and misfit way have been chosen, we have been created to offer our gifts to God and God's work in the world.

Contrary to much mainstream thinking, when we try to follow Christ in our lives we do not begin to mirror the values around us, but rather we discover that our lives are increasingly at odds with the surrounding culture. Sometimes these moments of mis-

fitness are easier to spot, like the teenager who went off to Governor's school and was given the official T-Shirt that on one side said "Accept Nothing," and on the other side said, "Question Everything," but instead preferred the T-Shirt he received at church, which on one side said, "Loser," and on the other had the words of Jesus, "Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." Or the Christian parents who at Christmas had the difficult task of explaining to their children that despite what all their friends were getting, they would only get three gifts a piece, so there would be plenty of gifts to give to children who wouldn't otherwise receive any Christmas gifts this year. At other times this mis-fitness is not so easy to recognize, like the insurance actuary who left his secure and well paid position with the company because his faith would not permit him to do the grizzly work of placing dollar values on clients who were killed in automobile accidents and beefing up the company's bottom line in the process, because he knew that human life can not be quantified in dollars and cents.

My guess is it's not just these folks who feel like misfits. My sense is that all of us, to the extent that we try to live faithfully, will feel like we don't belong, like somehow we don't fit in. Single people, retirees, teachers, investment bankers, all teenagers in the world – every one of us, in some way or another we feel like we are misfits, that we don't quite feel at home in the world. Our lives are off-balance, maybe just a few degrees, but enough to make us pause. And in that pause we might ask with Frodo, "Why me, I didn't choose this quest, this script that I find myself in." It is easy in that moment of pause for us to respond by saying, "Oh I want to fit in so badly, and I want my children to fit in, and I just want my job and family to be normal."

But this is the wrong approach. When we look at the chaos and craziness of the world around us, why would we ever want to fit in? Why would we ever want to be normal? The key to finding deeper meaning and purpose in our lives may not be working harder to fit in, the key to the life of grace, to life with God, to our life's purpose, is to find that place where we are unique, where our lives rub raw against the mainstream norms of our world – if we embrace that place, it is there we will find meaning and purpose, our calling you might say. I love what Frederick Buechner says, "in that place where your great gifts meet the world's great pain, that is where you will find God." Like these wise men who have been given this quest, who bring their gifts to the living Christ, who hold Herod's slaughter at bay long enough for the holy family to steal away in the night. If we embrace our own misfitness, James Taylor's words will ring true, "yes they went home by another way, home by another way, you and me can be wise-guys too and go home by another way." We will find our way home, though it may not be the path we expected or planned.

Often the mis-fits of the world who are the ones who generally do the real work of Christmas after Christmas is long over. The mis-fits of the world, the people who sometimes have trouble fitting in, feeling at home in the world around them, who often exemplify the words of this Howard Thurman poem:

"When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,  
To make music in the heart.”

This gritty Christmas work is the work of regular misfit disciples like you and me. And it is the only answer to our restless Christmas fatigue, to our lonely misfitness. The dream that we should all dream, the only New Year’s resolution that really matters in 2005, is that our lives would be better, more faithful, that God might use even us, like these oh so wise misfit kings, equipped for a quest they did not choose, but find it to be the only way to life, and at the end of the day, their only way home.