“Magi(c) Visit”

Matthew 2:1-12

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\*very different version than Luke tale\*

\*not 3 kings – but magi, wise men, astrologers, fortunetellers\*

God shows up in surprising ways.

Funny enough, the movie Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade always reminds me of this fact.

The adventurer/archeologist Dr. Jones sets out to rescue his father who has been kidnapped.

His plans get sidetracked as Indy and his dad decide to look for the Holy Grail, before the Nazi regime is able to get it.

They face dangers and obstacles along the way, eventually finding themselves in Petra, the place where the grail has been hidden.

The villain arrives at the same time and threatens to get the grail before Indy does.

When they arrive in the room, there are many cups and goblets set up.

It’s a test for the seeker to select the one from Christ’s last Supper with his disciples.

The villain has his lovely assistant select the cup that looks like it would be the She selects an ornate cup. One with jewels and pristine gold.

The villain takes a sip of water from it, expecting immortality, but instead he chose poorly and is killed instantly.

Wanting to save his father who has been shot, Indy surveys the various cups.

He looks them over, admiring their beauty and riches, but a discreet cup sits among them.

One that was humble to begin with and has worn down with age.

Indy hopes this is the right cup, so he takes a sip of it before trying it on his father.

Turns out he was right.

The cup representing Christ isn’t the one with jewels and gold.

It is the humble cup that looks more like every day ware than fine China.

Funny how a movie, meant for entertainment, is seeped with theological gems.

I can’t help but reflect when I watch the film.

That God shows up in surprising ways.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we are shown this right off the bat.

Matthew doesn’t waste any time when I comes to revealing God’s suprises.

We are told about the unexpected presence of God in the form of an ordinary baby.

This is scandalous and shocking.

The story of the Magi visiting Jesus is the epitome of surprise.

It is saturated with examples of God showing up in surprising ways.

First, there’s the star.

The star is revealed by God – not spoken or clear message.

The Magi aren’t outright told by God that the King had arrived.

They interpret it through their means of sorcery.

Like I said before, these visitors are often labeled “kings” but the text calls them “magi” which were more like astrologers, philosophers, sorcerers.

Ones who read the stars and interpreted their meanings.

Were they around today, they’d be the ones to write the horoscopes you find in the newspaper.

So, there’s this revelation through a star to these very bizarre recipients of the message.

They have no Jewish connection.

These magi aren’t tied to the community into which Jesus was born.

Strange that they would be the ones to understand the news first.

This would be like if a non churchy person were playing with a Ouija board.

You know, that board game that supposedly communicates with dead people.

I remember telling my Sunday school teacher about my exposure to the Ouija board at a slumber party and she got very upset.

She said it was a very anti-Christian thing to do.

Well, the Magi interpreting this star, would be a lot like a person playing with a Ouija board and learning about Jesus.

Very odd and highly unlikely!

The magi have no knowledge of Jewish tradition or scripture.

They are Gentiles to the core.

This shows that with Christ, all nations under God’s reign.

God’s revelation to all not just chosen people.

This is a huge change from how things were before.

Before it was only the nation of Israel that was chosen by God.

Now God speaks to those outside the family.

Another big surprise in this story, is where Jesus is born and lives.

Upon seeing the star, the magi head west in search of the new king.

They assume that the king would be born in a palace.

So they go to King Herod, expecting that to find the new king there.

Herod is quite surprised by their news that a new king has been born.

Turns out this new ruler was not born in a palace as expected.

He was born to a humble family.

Surprise #2 in the story.

Surprise #3 comes from Herod’s response to this news of the new king of the Jews.

A tiny baby shouldn’t pose a threat to a mighty ruler, but Herod is scared.

This baby, wearing diapers and drooling on himself turns out to be a major threat to Herod.

He’s angered by the news and wants to have the boy killed before he can do any damage in the kingdom.

Who knew a baby could cause so much harm!

The magi didn’t know this new king posed a threat to the current king.

Herod tells them to find the baby and let him know where he is.

He claims he wants to pay homage to the boy, but really he wants him killed.

The star reappears to the magi and the set out to follow it to the Christ child.

When they get there, they are overwhelmed by joy at the sight of Jesus Christ.

A rather appropriate response, if you think about it.

The encounter with God incarnate should be one that sparks overwhelming joy!

They pay homage to the child and offer gifts. ‘

Here’s where surprise #4 comes in.

These gifts carry significant symbolism:

Gold signifies royalty, frankincense divinity and myrrh symbolizes death.

The text doesn’t tell us if these symbolic gifts were intentional or if they just happened to bring them along.

Perhaps they knew the significance of the gifts, but we don’t know.

The first two are lovely gifts, and who would want something representing royalty and divinity for their baby.

I’d definitely include them on my baby registry.

But that myrrh is a bit disturbing.

I’d be curious to see Mary’s response to the gift of a myrrh.

It would be like giving someone a casket at their baby shower.

Not exactly an appropriate gift.

The symbolism in those gifts tell us a lot about Jesus and foreshadow his journey ahead.

The gifts show that he is a king, he is a deity, and that he will die.

Even as we celebrate his birth, his death looms overhead.

The fourth and final surprise in this story is the dream the magi have as they prepare to leave.

They’d planned on going back to Herod to reveal Jesus’ location.

But the message in the dream warned them not to, that they should just go home.

Thank goodness they didn’t return to Herod, or Jesus’ life would have been in imminent danger.

We’ll see what happens when Herod acts upon his fear and seeks to destroy Jesus.

That story comes next week.

So, again, God didn’t speak directly to these magi.

God didn’t clearly tell them the full story.

Rather, it was all revealed in a dream.

A surprising way of revealing information.

Just one of the many surprising ways that God shows up.

This story teaches us the importance of staying alert, watching for those ways that God shows up.

More often than not, it is going to happen in most unexpected ways.

We’ll encounter God through surprising means.

Through Jesus Christ, God creates many reversals of what we think should be.

Isn’t that how it usually goes?

We a take a job that wasn’t what we planned on, and life turns out much sweeter than we could have expected.

We say “yes” to a task we’re not too thrilled about, and are blessed in the end because we showed up.

We take a left when we know we should go right, and God meets us at the end of the road.

There are so many times in our lives when God shows up when we least expect it.

Same thing goes for life in the church.

When we think about who we are as a faith community, it can be easy to put God in a box.

To set up certain expectations that God will show up at certain times, or that God will bless certain ministries.

And yet, God seems to always be turning things on their head, doing the exact opposite of what we expect.

As we close out this year and look forward to a new one, may our eyes be open to the ways God will show up and surprise us.

May our hearts be open to tasks and decisions that might seem illogical, but the Spirit is guiding us to make them.

Like Indiana Jones selecting that boring, humble cup as the one representing Christ, the magi following that star to an ordinary home housing the king, we are called to make the decision that will allow God to work in ways we don’t expect.

After all, God usually shows up in those surprising ways.