

Pagans at the party

By [James Sledge](#)

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Growing up in the church, I knew all about the three wise men (although the Bible doesn't actually say how many magi were there). But I'm not sure I had ever heard of Epiphany. Like a lot of people, we just had the wise men show up with the shepherds at Christmas. They're still there with those shepherds at the manger in the nativity set on display in our living room.

But of course the Nativity story is in Luke and the Wise Men in Matthew. While tradition and convenience has joined the two stories together, the point of Epiphany sometimes gets lost in the process. Matthew doesn't actually tell any of the events at Jesus' birth. There's a pregnant Mary and an angel visiting Joseph and then a mention that a baby was born and named Jesus.

Sometime later, perhaps as long as two years later, magi from the east come because they have seen a sign in the heavens. These magi seem to be astrologers of some sort. Perhaps they are Zoroastrians. But one thing is certain. They are Gentiles and Gentiles who follow the stars to boot. And so in Matthew's gospel the first people to visit the young Messiah, the first to worship him, are about as far from a good Jew as you can get. They are pagans, outsiders extraordinaire. And their appearance in Jerusalem as they search for a new king frightens the religious insiders, not to mention the person currently claiming the title of king.

In Matthew, Jesus' birth is welcomed by outsiders, by pagans, and it instills fear in those who are heavily invested in the religious status quo, the political status quo, or both. But all these years later, Jesus seems not at all a threat to insiders, while we insiders still often look down on outsiders.

I'm happy to keep the Wise Men a part of the creche at my house, and it doesn't bother me at all if we sing "We Three Kings" at a Christmas service. But I think we would do well to take the time to embrace the unsettling message of Epiphany, where outsiders find it easy to accept the new day Jesus heralds, and insiders fret because they are more or less happy with things as they are.

May the joy and promise of Epiphany touch you and inspire you to give your all to the King.

Originally posted at [Pastor James](#).