

What Do You Mean By That

Menno Mennonite Church
January 4, 2026

Purpose: To explore the peculiarities of the nativity when we consider who is actually there.

Message: God with us means all of us, not just the suspects we are used to seeing in our sanitized view of the world

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (I will read); Isaiah 60:1-6 (please read)

Synopsis: We generally know what to expect when we use the familiar phrase of God with US. The us is a fairly predictable crew: the people we know and we are accustomed to. Those with whom we have shared the pews with that are basically, more or less, like US. The people that make sense and we are comfortable with. We extend this back into the biblical narrative and take it somewhat for granted that the people we gather at the manger belong there organically.

But then we look at who was there, really. The Shepherds were the lowest of the low. The Magi come practicing Astrology a practice explicitly forbidden by the law. Foreigners and weirdos. God comes to be with the US that is far larger than the guest list that, perhaps, we are accustomed to populating. And that is a challenge and a new light that can illumine us to God's full way well beyond our "Same old" expectations.

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem
in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod,
magi came from the east to Jerusalem.

2 They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We’ve seen his star in the east,
and we’ve come to honor him.”

3 When King Herod heard this, he was troubled,
and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him.

4 He gathered all the chief priests
and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born.

5 They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

6 You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel.”[a]

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi
and found out from them the time
when the star had first appeared.

8 He sent them to Bethlehem, saying,
“Go and search carefully for the child.
When you’ve found him, report to me
so that I too may go and honor him.”

9 When they heard the king, they went;
and look, the star they had seen in the east
went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was.

10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

11 They entered the house
and saw the child with Mary his mother.

Falling to their knees, they honored him.
Then they opened their treasure chests
and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

12 Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod,
they went back to their own country by another route.

Isn't it strange: it is often the very thing that makes who you are, your strength, that also can prove your undoing? We know it ourselves: the very stubbornness enables a robust resilience that has allowed me to achieve can also make me not the easiest person to actually live with. I am guessing that that few here need to think too long or hard about how you might fill in that blank. It is true in many areas of life and it is true, also, in the church. The closeness and intimacy that comes with being body together also yields the impression that the church is intrinsically a somewhat exclusive club. This has come to be by accident and design. Any reasonable reading of church history can give you the laundry list of actions taken to keep the church free from those who do not fit. Excommunications, shunning, pogroms, and scarlet letters have long marked the border of who is in and who is out. Anabaptists have especially been good at maintaining a spiritual pecking order, something that continues to this day. When you are bringing together a church with the expressed purpose of living the way of Christ, you are going to be that much more sincere in monitoring for spots and wrinkles. The very strength of the church is also its undoing, both for those from the outside looking in, and those who sometimes have learned this from the inside out.

I am not here to make a denunciation of the practices of the church and their excess, or where literal crying shames have occurred. We don't have that type of time. Nor is that my purpose. We have to deal with the fact that the church, for all its sacred beauty, is also singularly human, which means it is also broken and in need of healing. Both things can be true at the same time, especially when God is involved in the process. Again and again the Church has tried to distinguish itself from the world and if in some ways that's a good and natural thing to do, it is in other ways a dreadful and terrible thing to do. Because so very often what that has meant in history is that the Church becomes—to those on the inside at least—a fairly homogeneous group of folks whose number one task becomes the maintenance of that homogeneity. Sometimes it is by design, sometimes it is quite accidental, but it is something that we need to take a good long look at to take seriously. One way or the other we can loose our vision for what the church at its heart is and what it someday should and can be if we don't look these inclinations straight in the eye.

But we need to come back here: that is not how the thing was setup to be. From the very beginning it was setup to be something else entirely. My witness? Matthew. This gospel often said to be written for the Jews by a Jew. But it presents a story that brings the conventional ways

of being in the “way things are” to its knees. Matthew knows the impulse of Israel to keep itself to itself. Spiritual pedigree, genealogical entitlement and legalistic interpretation has taken the wheel over seeking to find where YHWH God might expand the lineage next. There is a penchant for the way things are in this world and world view.

And so, Matthew opens his gospel with what, to our ears, sounds like a fairly routine and route recitation of the family tree of Jesus through the many twists and turns of the life-and-times of the people of God. You know—the part of Matthew we never read with all the begats. But if you actually know the stories that are being cited here, it is anything but dry or expected and actually doesn’t do much to commend the Son of God on merit of heritage. Four foreign born women (three with fairly dubious pasts). We know that even the connection to royalty—the son of David—has a whole lot more complex and skeletons in the closet than easy commendation. Clearly God was up to something bigger than just saving the usual suspects when it came to the messiah as he is being introduced.

Matthews opening chapter introduces the hero of the story—the one to be called Immanuel, God with us. But then he goes about complicating that all important us part as he explains precisely what that includes. That brings us to our story today which is populated with the characters we know well from our nativity sets. The kings from the orient who come from afar with rare and confounding gifts. We are so used to them that they have been adopted as part of the prescribed guest list. But then we have to remember: this group (we don’t actually know that there are 3) from Baghdad more or less who are astrologers, Their pseudo-science was one that was explicitly condemned in the law being brought by the nature of the Magi who any self-respecting Israelite was bound to detest as someone without a holy bone in their body.

Then, they turn out that they just aren’t really all that bright. They come into the court of one of the most paranoid, power hungry, preoccupied people to ever hold power in that time and to ask casually where the new king might be. This error in protocol at least if not outright common sense (since when do rulers of any stripe want to hear a word of the successor) would cost an untold number of young lives before it was all over. It can be laid at the feet of these pagans, even if they came to their senses before it was all over.

And these are the people Matthew lumps into God with US. These guys are just as welcome here at the bedside of the Son of God as where Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba of old. We hear no word of their conversion, their enlightenment. They come as they are, leave the

portentous gifts, and go on their way, likely handing out horoscopes the whole way home. But here they are—part of the us right along the scruffy shepherds and the increasingly befuddled parents. From the get go the us was way bigger than any parochial concern.

There is really no missing this in Matthew. He is not done with this theme by a long shot, and he keeps coming back to it with Jesus saying the wrong thing to the wrong people from Samaritan women to tax collectors. He keeps on doing this right up to the point where the resurrected Immanuel assures his follows that Immanuel with be with them even to the ends of the earth, and then commissions them to take this message to precisely those folks they might meet in those ends of the earth: Persian folks, Egyptian folks, Roman folks, Greek folks, African folks, and all kind of folks the disciples didn't even know existed in other parts of a world they still didn't even know was round. The core group was commissioned to go and make disciples of the them, baptizing them into the us to whom Immanuel was sent just so they could know that they were part of this us too. All of these where part of the us to which Immanuel was sent.

How is that for an Epiphany? How is that for a full inclusion into the us that just keeps spreading? God comes to us and reveals Godself for the whole of creation, and the whole of human experience, not just that which is stayed and solid, those who we expect to be on the righteous inside. This was precisely part of what got Immanuel in trouble with the powers that be. Jesus wasn't willing to be constrained by expectations of the in crowd nor ruled by the demands of the pure. That is a great way to get into trouble. Standing out usually is. I remember being at one Mennonite Convention in the younger-far more stayed days of the Mennonite Church where the exuberance of the youth worship service (something that is worth the price of admission on its own) was a bit more tightly wound. Presently, music time is a quasi organized mosh pit down front with praise music. Then standing and waving arms was about as far as was permitted, something that I found out when I was found dancing in the aisles, only to be taken by the arm and shown my seat by an organizer with sure instructions that this was not to be allowed. To be sure: I am not sure I was in the right in dancing. I think it was expressly against the rules now that I mention it. But what is in and what is out is always going to be a challenge that needs of the navigated. Times have changed, but the struggle of finding ways to celebrate this weird, wide variety of the church absolutely continues and in far bigger ways than what happens at church convention.

Because that is always the challenge that Immanuel brings. Whenever we settle on the us that we might choose the revelation, God with us is always going to challenge us in ways that we might expect. God comes and reveals to us the God that we need even beyond the God that we want. Expect the unexpected, Jesus was saying and Matthew was teaching. Look for wild diversity, not buttoned-down uniformity, in the Church that would soon be built. Expect surprises. See the unpredictable as they only inevitability worth talking about. Expect barriers and dividing walls to be breached and eradicated, expect former foes to become sisters and brothers, those you once shunned to become cherished friends. Because that is the nature of the body of Christ—it invites us into a bigger sense of self than what we could ever imagine. We do well to remember that the us that is ours is always bigger than what we might naturally expect. Even before we take on the big issues of the day we are brought together across that which would divide us and we are invited into the us of Jesus Christ.

May this revelation become our guiding star as we join what God is doing in revealing the fullness of God each and every day. Amen.