

Scriptures: Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany

During the Advent season we talked a little about the Magi coming to see Jesus Christ, the One born King of the Jews. Today is Epiphany, a day when the Church celebrates the coming of the Magi from the East to see Jesus. In some Church traditions based in European heritage, the Christmas season extends through Epiphany on January 6, and children are given small gifts each day from December 26 to January 6. It ends up being “the twelve days of Christmas,” and I’m sure you’ve heard that song!

So today, since it’s the Sunday before Epiphany, we’ll consider again the Wise Men coming to see Jesus. Then next week, we’ll celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday in the Church calendar – a time when we remember again the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, and what that means for us as His faithful followers. If you have your Bible, or a Bible app handy, turn with me to the Gospel according to Matthew, we’ll read chapter 2, verses 1-12. I’ll be reading from the New International Version. **Read Matthew 2:1-12.**

Out-of-Towners

Most of you know by now that this past week Kendra, the girls, and I took a vacation out of State. It was an adventure. We had a lot of time spent in the car, in traffic, with each other. And we talked with various locals from the Sevierville/Pigeon Forge/Gatlinburg area. Listening to the waitresses, hotel clerks, and salespeople talking to us, I’m certain they could tell we were from out-of-town. Folks in that part of Appalachia have a bit of a twang in their dialect compared to ours. I find it charming, and could listen to them talk all day.

I suspect that when the Magi arrived at the royal palace in Jerusalem, the people of Jerusalem may have recognized they were also out-of-towners. They knew they didn’t fit into their society. They were different. I suspect the inhabitants of Jerusalem on that Epiphany long ago may not have been quite as accommodating with the Magi as what the Tennessee Volunteers were with us. St. Matthew records, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.’ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him,” (Matt. 2:1-3).

Villainous Herod

Every good story needs a villain. The people were wild about Herod – he went down in history as Herod the Great – because he finished building the temple in

Jerusalem. And he knew how to keep peace with Rome. So if he was upset, everyone else who mattered in the society was upset. So what does Herod do? He decides he needs more information – the guy who was running the show was in the dark, even though the Light had dawned! “When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a Ruler who will be the Shepherd of My people Israel,’” (verses 4-6).

So Herod has the information he needs to figure out the place Jesus was born, but he still doesn’t know when the Word Incarnate came to dwell among us. “Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared,” (verse 7), we’re told next. Now he knows where Jesus is, and when He was born. All he needs next, is for someone to go find Jesus, and come back and tell him how to find Him – which is what we’re told Herod planned. Matthew writes, “Herod sent them to Bethlehem and said, ‘Go and make a careful search for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him,’” (verse 8).

The Magi – because they were foreigners – didn’t recognize the deceptiveness of King Herod. They took him at face value. “After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed,” (verses 9-10). So they went off to find Jesus – and when they found Him, they did three things.

Seeing, Worshiping, Joyful Responding

“On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh,” (verse 11). Did you catch the three things done by the Magi? The first thing they did was to come to the house and see Jesus with His mother, Mary. The second thing they did was to bow down and worship Him. The third thing they did was to present Him with their gifts – gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

There’s a lot for us to unpack in verse 11. For starters, we get the Nativity scene wrong every time we do it. The Magi didn’t show up on Christmas night in Bethlehem. Christmas night is when the star appeared, and they decided to set off on their journey. Bible scholars suggest that the Magi were Zoroastrian astrologers – people who lived in modern-day Iran, who studied the stars to try to understand what God wanted them to do. They see the star, and decide to follow it to Bethlehem to see the cause of it. Something I’ve touched on earlier, about them being out-of-towners is also worth repeating.

They weren't Jews. They were Gentiles. Something in their pagan religion sparked an interest in examining the night sky, and seeing a strange light, they decided to follow, and found Jesus. Not the Baby wrapped in cloths in a manger, but a Child, living in a house, we're told. And they bowed and worshiped Him when they found Him.

Three Kings?

We traditionally say that three Wise Men, or three Kings visited the Christ Child. We get the story wrong. The Magi were certainly not kings. In those days, if a king left his country to travel to a foreign land, he wouldn't have been able to return to his throne – he would have been replaced by someone else. And if it would have been only three men traveling together to bring these costly gifts to Christ, they would have never made it to Jerusalem from their home country. Bandits would have robbed and killed them.

Even if we assume that only three men came bearing the gifts, they would have hardly created the ruckus they created when they arrived in Jerusalem and met with Herod. Scripturally, we're told that they brought three gifts – that's the three – I suspect it was a large caravan, an entourage of wealthy men, their wives, servants, and others, coming to see the Light that had come into the world.

I know, the hymn we sang earlier is a great song. I like "We Three Kings," a lot! In Church tradition, we've even named the Wise Men – Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar. What they give Jesus carries a better message than trying to figure out how many there were, and where they came from. So I want to focus on the gifts they gave, and what they did, because that's the important take away for us today.

Gifts of the Magi

They gave gold – their wealth. An ounce of gold – and we can presume that the Magi brought and delivered more than an ounce of gold – is currently valued around \$2,000. Gold has always been associated with the wealth of royalty. Royalty had enormous amounts of gold. We saw that on display this last fall, when Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and of the other Commonwealth realms died. During her State funeral, the Crown was laid atop her casket. As part of the funeral processes throughout the Commonwealth, the gold-encrusted scepters that represent the Queen in the parliaments of each Commonwealth realm were broken in two so that they could be remade and replaced once Charles is officially crowned as their king.

Gold is given by the Magi to Christ, because they recognize that Jesus is a king – and not just any king, but He's the King of Kings. I'll touch more on that in a minute. The second gift they gave – incense, or frankincense – was, and is, an expensive spice made into a perfume. The current going rate for frankincense, according to Google, is \$6,000 per liter. We can only guess at how many liters they gifted to Jesus.

Frankincense was used during the worship service in the temple at Jerusalem. It was used by the high priest to perfume the altar area known as the Holy of Holies – which he could enter only one day every year, on Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement. Any human wearing it as a perfume was to be cut off from the people and banished from the community. That’s how sacred it was. It was a perfume to be used – and given – to God alone. And so, in giving this gift to Jesus, the Magi are saying that they recognize He is not just a king – the King of Kings – but they’re also recognizing Him as God in human flesh.

The last gift they give to the Christ Child is the gift of myrrh. It’s also an expensive spice. It was used in anointing services on priests and kings, and on purification rituals in the tabernacle and later temple. It was also used in the embalming process. Again, we don’t know how much myrrh the Magi gave to the Holy Child, but after Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday, when Joseph of Arimathea put His body in the tomb, Nicodemus, another Pharisee who believed in Jesus, brought about 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint His body and prepare it for burial, John’s gospel records (Jn. 19:38-39). The burial spices Nicodemus brought to use on the dead body of Christ are estimated to have a value of about \$200,000 in today’s currency.

They had an Inkling of What God was Doing

It stands to reason, from the Biblical evidence we have, that the Magi had some idea of who Jesus was. They had a basic understanding of His purpose for coming to earth, and what He would later do to save us, by dying on the cross. They bowed and worshiped Him. Sadly, I think there are some self-identifying Christians out there who wouldn’t dream of bending their knees, stooping in respect, or giving everything they’ve got to the One who gave His very life in exchange for theirs.

You see, friends, even the Gentile Magi, who didn’t have what we would consider a personal relationship with God as His covenant people did, still had an inkling of what God was doing in the world to transform it into His original design. They were wise enough to listen to Him, through the Holy Spirit. “And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route,” (Matt. 2:12). They heard the message, they paid attention to what it said, and then they obeyed. If you read a little further along in Matthew’s gospel, you see this obedience to the nudging of the Holy Spirit saved the life of Jesus Christ, while causing a genocide when Herod realized the gig was up.

Something for us to think about, as God’s people, living in obedience to Christ is this: Can God speak to those, like the Magi, who do not yet know Him? I’m convinced He can, and does! And supposing He does, are we coming along beside them to gently lead them into a life-saving, and life-changing relationship with the Risen Christ?

In the Bleak Midwinter

English poet Christina Rossetti lived in the mid-to-late 1800's. She was diagnosed with thyroid disease, and later, with breast cancer. In the midst of her poor health and suffering, she penned a poem, which was set to music about ten or twenty years later and became a well known Christmas hymn in Britain and throughout the Commonwealth. The last stanza of *In the Bleak Midwinter*, asks a pertinent question even for us today. It asks, "What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a Wise Man I would do my part. Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart."¹

The Magi gave their gifts, worshiped Jesus Christ, and then went on their way in obedience to the word spoken to them. We have the complete Word – Jesus Christ, the Son of God, revealed to us on the pages of Holy Scripture. If we've done our part, by giving Him our heart, are we also giving Him our gifts, our worship, and doing what He's called us to do? And so, in this New Year, 2023, I give you this challenge. I hope that we will live lives of greater faithfulness to our Heavenly Father, and to each other by being "plugged in" – spending time daily in the Bible and in prayer, and weekly with each other through corporate worship here in-person, if we're able.

Prayer: O God of Light and Peace, whose glory, shining in the Child of Bethlehem still draws the nations to Yourself: Dispel the darkness that shrouds our path, that we may come to kneel before Christ in true worship, offer Him our hearts, souls, and minds, and return from His presence to live as He has taught. Amen.

¹ Christina Rossetti, "In the Bleak Midwinter," *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing, 1989), page 221.