

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 60:1-6
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2024

“The Magi Come”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

At an Epiphany service the pastor was quizzing some of the children about the nativity. He asked, “What gifts did the three wise men give the Christ child?”

“Gold!” yelled out one child.

“Frankincense!” shouted another.

One child, however, was paying absolutely no attention. He was busy trying to do a handstand next to the pulpit. When the pastor asked again he gave it his best shot. After a pause he put his finger to his mouth and guessed, “Gift cards?”

Nope. No gift cards. Be helpful today, not so much then!

Today we celebrate the Epiphany. An epiphany is defined as a moment of sudden clarity and understanding, a time when something has been revealed or made manifest. The visit of the Magi is described as the Epiphany because it is the first time Christ was revealed to the Gentiles.

Despite the words of the wonderful Christmas carol “We Three Kings”, the magi who came to see Jesus were not kings. Their identification as “wise men” is also kind of a generic compromise. From magi comes the word “magician.” Think . . . Merlin. And it is also not necessarily the case that there were only three of them simply because there were three gifts. There could have been any number of magi travelling together in a group for safety. In fact, it is likely that there were a lot more than three.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh were items that the magi would have already had. They did not need to go shopping. These were tools of the trade. But they also had symbolic value. These were gifts typically given to royalty. And they were portable and easily turned into cash. Joseph would have likely used these gifts to fund the family’s time in Egypt.

The Magi came from “the east.” There are two possibilities. They could have come from Parthia which is also known to us as Persia and now is Iran. Or they could have come from Nabatea, today Jordan, part of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Where we draw the lines around countries changes. The Nabateans controlled the spice trade in frankincense and myrrh. And there was a lot of interaction between Israel and Nabatea. Herod’s son Herod Antipas married a Nabatean princess. Both Parthians and Nabateans would have known something about Jewish prophecies. But regardless of nationality, the magi were probably Zoroastrian priests who practiced their trade by traveling from

court to court. They would offer advice at the courts of kings and officials. They would choose the correct offerings to the gods ensuring the king's success. They would interpret dreams and signs. And they would use astrology because astrology was considered a hard science at the time. So it is not surprising that it was a group of magi who took note of a strange new development, a new star. It was widely understood that a new star pointed to a new king, and this particular star led them to Israel.

The magi came first to Jerusalem, a logical place to start. There they started asking questions. They did not go to Herod and ask questions. Magi were not stupid. They would have known Herod's reputation. But Herod heard about their questions and sent for them. Refusing to go was not an option.

In many ways Herod the Great was a great king. There was political stability under his reign. He did extensive public works. He began work on the Temple. But the older Herod got the more paranoid he got, and paranoid kings are not happy kings. He murdered one of his wives and three of his sons. His other sons survived because their mothers sent them away. According to the historian Josephus when Herod knew that he was dying he had an elite group of citizens arrested with orders to execute them when he died, just so someone would weep at his death. There is no record of whether or not his orders were carried out once he was dead.

The arrival of magi from the east is a mysterious element in the story of Jesus' birth. On the surface it seems odd that these outsiders would come to worship him. And not only were they outsiders, they were outsiders of a very dubious profession. Magi were not looked upon kindly within Judaism. But the magi came from the east, as did the rising sun. It all tied together with the prophecies. It also made sense politically. The magi did not go to Rome to seek a new king, despite the fact that Rome was the dominant political force of the time. They went to tiny Bethlehem. Both the Parthians and the Nabateans were no friends of Rome. In 106 CE both nations were conquered, but Parthia managed to get free quickly because the next emperor lost interest. The Magi were from one of two possible nations that were allies in their struggle against the mighty Roman Empire.

The Magi were also Gentiles. There's no getting around it. They were non-Jews come to pay homage to a Jewish king. They were foreign in both their customs and appearance. Epiphany is about the gospel going to outsiders. It's about breaking down dividing walls and ending hostility. It is about bringing people IN.

The fact that God used outsiders from another religion to provide for God's son should tell us something. There are no outsiders as far as God is concerned. God loved the Gentiles too. God worked through some of their religious leaders. And yet we are not comfortable with this level of difference. We're suspicious. We're afraid and uncomfortable. An Imam would not be found preaching in a Presbyterian church or a synagogue. A female pastor would not be welcome to preach in a mosque, or in a lot of churches for that matter. Catholics and Protestants don't trust each other. To us the "other" is dangerous, a force for evil. People who are different might question why we do things the way we do. They might want to change us to become like them. And in truth, a lot of this does go on. People do try to convert each other. And we do

so not only because we all think we're right and everyone else is wrong, but because difference makes us uncomfortable.

God brought magi to Jesus to worship him and to provide for him. God may well bring unexpected magi to us to meet a need. God is full of surprises, and not limited in who God uses. Today we rejoice that we are ordaining and installing new elders and deacons. They're not magi, but God has brought them to this place at this time. And God has brought us all together at the beginning of this new year to see with open eyes and open hearts all that God has for us. God provides, in ways we expect, and in ways and through people we would never imagine. Amen.

Isaiah 60:1-6

60 “Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
2 See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
3 Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 “Lift up your eyes and look about you:
All assemble and come to you;
your sons come from afar,
and your daughters are carried on the hip.
5 Then you will look and be radiant,
your heart will throb and swell with joy;
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,
to you the riches of the nations will come.
6 Herds of camels will cover your land,
young camels of Midian and Ephah.
And all from Sheba will come,
bearing gold and incense
and proclaiming the praise of the Lord.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”
3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:
6 “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 shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.