

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 60:1-6
SECOND LESSON: Matthew 2:1-12
January 8, 2023

“Epiphany”

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

To have an epiphany is to experience a sudden insight. Epiphany means manifestation or revelation. Something is revealed. When the answer to a problem we have long struggled with suddenly comes to us, we have an epiphany. But as far as the church year is concerned, the Epiphany is when the magi first saw Jesus, the newborn king, revealed.

In our Christmas pageants we always have the shepherds and wise men arrive one after the other, because a long break in between is impossible. But in real life there *was* a long break between the two events. The shepherds arrived immediately. The Magi came much later. They would have seen the star while in Persia, now Iran, when Jesus was born and begun their journey then, a journey that would have taken many months. They probably traveled the Silk Road and the Royal Road west and then the King’s Highway south. Even celebrating the Epiphany now two weeks after Christmas is way too soon to be anywhere near historically accurate.

Magi were not kings, no matter what the Christmas carol says. They came to be called kings because of the passage from Isaiah we read this morning which says “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Magi were actually members of a priestly caste from Persia. It is likely they were Zoroastrian, but they would have had access to the Hebrew scriptures. In fact, Persian magi would have had close contact with Jews. A large community of Jews lived in Iran. Not all of the Jewish community taken captive by the Babylonians 500 years earlier returned to Israel when permitted to do so. They had put down roots and chose to remain. It was the largest community of Jews living outside of the holy land. The appearance of a strange new bright star in the west must have caused a lot of speculation among the community there. They looked to the prophet Balaam, from the book of Numbers who proclaimed, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” (Num. 24:17).

The status of magi varied widely depending upon who the individual magi were. Some were advisors to kings. They were highly respected astrologers and scientists, traveling from realm to realm giving advice and counsel to rulers. Magi were astrologers, and astrology was considered a hard science. But they were also skilled in philosophy, medicine, alchemy and natural science. A group of traveling magi would not have been uncommon because that is how they made their living, traveling from one local ruler to another offering professional advice. But while there were highly respected magi there

were also magi of dubious qualifications. Magi is where we get the word “magician” and “magic” from.

Unfortunately, we know absolutely nothing about the magi who came to see Jesus. We don't even know that there were three of them. The western tradition says three because there were three gifts, but the eastern tradition says there were twelve. I would guess some other random number, because there was safety in numbers when travelling.

The gifts that the magi brought, gold, frankincense and myrrh, were items that magi would have possessed as part of their tradecraft. Much is made of their symbolism. Gold is a gift for a king. Frankincense is used in temple worship and therefore a gift fit for a priest. Myrrh was used as an anointing oil and also for burial. But on a purely pragmatic level, magi **used** gold, frankincense and myrrh. They did not make a special shopping trip. We all know that three wise women would have brought baby clothes, diapers, blankets and food. These were men, they were single, and they were academics. Practical did not come into it. But their gifts did have two advantages. First, they were portable, and second, they could all easily be converted to cash, money that Joseph no doubt needed when he took the family and fled to Egypt. Joseph would have had to purchase a camel, a tent, bedding and food supplies. He also would have had to pay to join a caravan with armed protection. Getting to Egypt was not a matter of packing the car or booking a flight. Travel was hard and it was dangerous. And once they got to their goal, most likely the large metropolitan city of Alexandria that had a large Jewish population they could disappear in, they would have needed money to get established.

When the magi finally found Jesus in Bethlehem he was in a house, either the same home he was born in or another one. Having worshipped Jesus, they were then warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, so they returned to their country by another route. But Herod had likely been the last person the magi had wanted to encounter in the first place. They could not possibly have been ignorant of the political realities. They made their living paying attention to such things, so they had probably been on a knife edge when they were summoned to the palace earlier. **Herod had a reputation.** He may have been a great king in his younger days building public structures, palaces and entire cities and ports, as well as the Temple itself, but as Herod aged his paranoia grew. He knew that the Jews did not really accept him. His parents had been converts, his father an Edomite and his mother a Nabatean. And he ruled at the behest of Rome. Herod felt so threatened that in time he murdered his wife, his mother-in-law and three of his sons who he thought were plotting against him. Although the magi come across as naïve in our account, we can rest assured they were not.

We like fairy tales and heroes. We are drawn to stories where the good guys are always completely good, and always win in the end. Our favorite stories end in a moment of triumphant climax when all foes are vanquished. Cinderella ends in a glorious wedding. Hans Solo defeats Darth Vader and they are all awarded medals. In movies and TV shows the bad guys are hunted down and justice triumphs. We NEVER see the next day or the next week, because we don't want to see reality. Heroes never suffer from PTSD or have

crippling arthritis later in life from all the physical battles they endured. No one second guesses themselves or gets depressed. And just like in Hollywood, we expect our sports idols to be strong and capable, able to take hit after hit without flinching or failing. Heart attacks on the field do not happen to 24-year-olds in our idealized imagination, and we continue to put players in situations where repeated concussions will have devastating results later in their lives. We WANT to see the illusion of strength and perfection. We don't want to see the real cost.

But life is not a beautiful illusion. We have all been taught to picture a grand visit of men dressed in silk with jewels dripping off them. We don't smell the camels and body odor of these same men who have been traveling for months and were no doubt dressed very practically for that purpose. Whoever they were, they were real, and they served a real purpose. They opened the door to the Gentile world to worship Jesus. They recognized and declared the hand of God at work. And they provided real, practical financial help to Mary and Joseph, help that enabled them to keep Jesus safe.

God is always practical. The temptation for us is to take the stories in the bible and remove them from our lived experience. Those people are somehow perfect and their world is straight out of a children's picture bible. What we see is two-dimensional. But God came into a three-dimensional world. All of the characters in the salvation story were people just like us. And God's help was far more than symbolic. It was very down to earth. In my own experience I know that if I ever come into money I am not expecting, I don't run out and spend it, because right around the corner a need is going to arise, mine or someone else's, and that money will always be exactly what's needed. God provided through the magi what would be needed, even before Mary and Joseph knew they would need it. 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 Jerusalem ² 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.