

Hopkins South Monterey

United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

Jan 3, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Gracious and Surprising God,

Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you.

Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you

know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.

Sermon

Epiphany is celebrated by most Christian Churches with a few differences. Epiphany day is always January 6th, the 13th day of the Christmas season. The time between Christmas and Epiphany is the 12 days of Christmas that the song, "12 Days of Christmas" is all about.

For Western Christians (like in the U.S., Latin America, Spain, France, England) the feast primarily commemorates the coming of the Magi (the 3 wise men) with only a minor reference to the baptism of Jesus and the miracle at the Wedding at Cana. Eastern churches (like in Greece, Russia, Turkey, Czech Republic) celebrate the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River for Epiphany. In both traditions the essence of the celebration is the same: the manifestation of Christ to the world.

Every country and culture has a unique way of celebrating the Epiphany. In some cultures, the decorations and nativity scenes put up for Christmas are taken down at Epiphany. This is not just a small tidying up of Christmas decorations in a lot of the places that celebrate Epiphany in a big way. A lot of countries in Europe remain quite Catholic and so the towns put up extravagant decorations. I studied abroad in Spain for a semester in college and was honored to get the chance to stay through the holidays with a friend. It meant I got a chance to see many neighborhood nativities, which put all other nativities to shame. They are huge in size and very detailed.





Keeping this up, and putting it away later is no small feat! There, all Christmas decorations are kept up until Epiphany and Christmas celebrations like concerts and gatherings continue.

Celebration goes beyond just continuing Christmas. In countries historically shaped by Western Christianity, like ours, the customs specific to Epiphany often involve gift giving, “king pastries” and a celebration to close the Christmas season. In some of those countries, Epiphany is a bigger celebration than Christmas day. Spain is one of those places. Christmas still includes family gatherings, a holiday meal and a small gift exchange, but their Epiphany gatherings look much more like our Christmas gatherings. That is when more presents are shared and they have their own legendary figures that bring gifts in secret to the children. In much of Spain, Santa or a St. Nicholas' equivalent is not a big deal, only starting to be more acknowledged because of US culture spreading. There, kids believe the three kings come to leave treats and gifts in their shoes on Epiphany, and they write letters with their wishes and go to the malls to meet and take pictures with the three kings.



In Germany, Groups of young people called Sternsinger (Star Singers) travel door to door dressed as the three Wise Men, plus the leader carrying a star. These singers will be offered treats at the homes they visit, but they also ask for donations for worthy causes.

The tradition is similar in Belgium, where children dress up as the wise men and go door to door to sing songs and people give them money or sweets. Not that different from Trick-or-Treating here.

In England, they celebrate Twelfth night which is the night before Epiphany through a big meal, often with a traditional Twelfth Cake, a dense fruitcake, as dessert.

In Italy, they celebrate with a figure called La Befana, a broomstick riding woman, who brings gifts to children. The legend behind here is that she missed her opportunity to bring a gift to baby Jesus with the Wise Men and so she now spends Epiphany night searching for baby Jesus and giving presents to every child in case they are Jesus.

In Puerto Rico, kids put out little boxes of grass to feed the wise men's horses. Mexican families eat a Rosca de reyes or their version of a King Cake and leave out shoes for the wise men to leave gifts in.

In the French speaking Caribbean and New Orleans Epiphany does mark the end of Christmas, but more importantly it marks the start of Carnival season that lasts until the

beginning of Lent with Ash Wednesday. This season brings joyous celebrations with parties and parades and king cakes.

In traditionally Orthodox countries, the celebrations are usually focused on water activities, baptismal rites and house blessings.

In Bulgaria and Greece they have traditional competition of who can find a cross dropped into the water. In Bulgaria this is a bit more of a polar plunge into the icy water. In Greece, the plunge follows a procession to the water.

In Prague, Czech Republic, there is a Three Kings swim down the main river.

In Poland, they go to church and have a small box blessed, it contains chalk, a gold ring, incense and a piece of amber. They they go home and chalk their doors with an inscription: "K or C + M + B + the year." This is thought to protect against illness and misfortune. This is also practices some in Germany and Austria.

In Russia, Epiphany is celebrated on January 19 and focuses on the baptism of Jesus. They do a rite of the "Great Blessing of the Waters." They believe that water becomes holy and has special powers on this day. So, they cut holes in the ice on lakes and rivers and bathe in the water.

No matter the way they celebrate it, no matter how grand and fancy or small and casual, Epiphany is celebrated as a remembrance of the importance and greater meaning of Christ being a true manifestation of God on earth as acknowledged by Heaven for the whole world to know. That is what today's Bible passage, telling the story of the wise men, is ultimately about. There are a lot of ways we talk about it, but ultimately, the importance of their story in the greater Nativity story is that they are the first mark in the book of Matthew that Jesus did not just come for the Jewish people, but for the Gentiles, for the whole world.

Speaking of this story's place in the book of Matthew, as I read the actual text from the Bible, I am reminded how much of the Nativity story that we think of is actually a combination of all the gospels and some added on details through tradition and the built up legend over years of storytelling. I am also left with some questions. Did you know or remember that the wise men only show up in the book of Matthew? It's the shepherds that show up in Luke, and only in Luke. Over the thousands of years we have mashed these two accounts together and sprinkled in some ideas from Mark and John to make one narrative story. It's not a bad thing overall, but it does mean that we miss out on some of the deeper meaning in each unique telling in the Gospels.

There are many things in the nativity story that are more from the overall legend and efforts to make it a smooth narrative that are not truly the details given to us in Scripture. I'll start with some of the more straightforward differences. The only kings mentioned in this passage Matthew 2:1-12 are Herod and Jesus, not these visitors from afar. They are called Magi in the Greek, which translates to Magician or sorcerer when the word is used in Acts. But it could also be said to mean astrologer or wise men. The idea of them being Kings comes from applying predictions of the Messiah's coming from Psalms and Isaiah in post. Based on the best estimations, they were likely Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, such as astrology or dreams, and would now be described as Pagans, but where they come from is only a guess, we are not told. So, they likely were not Kings. Now to really trash the song, "We Three Kings," which we will be singing later, the Bible text also does not give a number of how many of these Magi came. It has been deduced later that because there were three gifts, that could mean there were three Magi, but the Biblical text does not give any other indication of the number beyond that. It is probably not shocking at this point to hear that they are not given names in the scripture. So it is unlikely that they were named Melchior, Gaspar, and Bathazar. The tradition that gives them those names also gives them diverse origins. This is why some nativity scenes depict the three wise men as three different races. The scripture does not give us much detail to go off of, but archeological or historical sources do not add anything, as there is no corroborating evidence of this event.

While I am tearing down the mythos around this episode of the Nativity story, I will also point out that in this account, Mary and Joseph were living in Bethlehem, did not travel there, and they are visited by the Magi in a house, not a manger or a stable or any of that. That imagery all comes from Luke.

Now a question. What is going on with the star? Did it come from the east? Did it rise in the east but somehow point them west? How is it a star and the Magi are in the east but then they travel West to see Jesus? It is likely that this is a translation confusion. Another option in describing the star is that, "They saw it at its rising" instead of "in the east." So the star rose, and the Magi came from the East to the West. The star itself is still a great mystery. Some have tried to apply different astrological explanations, but none quite fit with the descriptions of the star given in the text. It could have been something like the crossing of Jupiter and Saturn like we have seen in the sky this Winter and the way it moves and stops over the house in Bethlehem could be an embellishment, or it could have been a more Godly direction in the sky just for the Magi. The important aspect for the book of Matthew is that a star like that was both a signal of the Messiah based on prophecy from the book of Numbers, and a signal for the Roman and Greek Gentiles that the "heavens" picked a new ruler. So, it is another part of this story that points to Christ coming for both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Now about the gifts. There are a couple of interesting things about the gifts. The traditional interpretation of the gifts, for who knows how long is that the Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh were expensive luxury gifts fit for a King. So, it indicates that the Magi were not just following this star to watch the shiny and follow it for fun. They knew they were going to be meeting someone important, the King of Kings and brought gifts accordingly. Not only that, but that each gift is a symbol for part of who Jesus is which comes together in the identity of Christ Matthew ultimately wants us to understand; in this interpretation, the Gold is a gift given to a King indicating worldly sovereignty, this points to Jesus being the King above all Kings on earth and the King of the Kingdom of God. Frankincense is a type of incense that would be used in the worship of the divine, so it points to Jesus's divinity and that he should be worshipped equally to God. Last is Myrrh, which was an oil that was also used in embalming, and so acts as a foretelling of Jesus's death. This is an intriguing interpretation, and works with some of the overall take-aways from the story of the Magis. That said, there is not much indication that this allegory was intended by Matthew. Another option, which does not cancel out the other one, but grounds the gifts more in the human realm, is that while these were luxury items, they were also gifts as much for the parents as they were for Jesus. That is possible because Frankincense and Myrrh were also used for medical purposes, particularly for postnatal healing as antiseptic and anti-inflammatory. Myrrh has healing properties that mean its still used in lotions today and Frankincense was a major antiseptic at that time. Interestingly, the Gold would have also been a help to Mary and Joseph as the Matthew account tells of their need to flee to Egypt to protect Jesus from being killed by Herod. The Gold would have helped fund that journey. Even the gifts bring together the grand revelations of Jesus and the needs of the real people.

So, that's a lot of stuff that the story of the Magis is not. So what is even left? The biggest parts is the importance of who the Magi are at the most basic level, and how they ended up doing what now makes them famous. It is easy for us Christians today to not bat an eye at the idea of Jesus having come for all peoples. It is something we talk about a decent amount, and is the reason that all of us here, I think, are Christians at all. So, it is something that we accept as truth easily. But when Jesus came, and into the time that the Gospel of Matthew was written, it was not such a given. The Jewish people were expecting a savior for them. In the stories of Paul's ministry in Acts we read more specifically about the fighting he had to do to convince the early church to widen their circle to allow for Gentiles to also hear the Good News of Jesus and be included in the faith community. It was not a given based on the prophecies and Jewish tradition. It is a big deal that our Savior, our Messiah, came and was not limited to one group of people and not only allowed it, but specifically threw the doors open and tore down the walls and pointed out to the rest of the world and said, "They can be included to, as they are." The Magi are particularly an example of this as their story tells of them finding Jesus both through the star, a sign they noticed and followed as part of their skills from their

cultural context, and scripture. King Herod told them where to find Jesus based on the writings of scripture that he shared with them. They were able to find Jesus through the combination of their own tradition and the tradition of our faith. They are able to obey the movement of God in and through them because they brought what makes them different from those already in the faith and meshed it with the practices of our faith. The Magi give us an example of God at work among the outsiders, through those that we would consider outside of the faith or even completely opposite it. God works through many in ways we would not expect to bring about God's Kingdom among us. And look at what happens because of it? Because the Magi are able to fully be themselves and have their unique relationship with God, they listen to God's warning in their dreams that King Herod had not been honest with them when he said he wanted to know where to find Jesus so he could also worship him. No, they hear God's warning in their dreams and act accordingly. They hear that warning and defy the royal power on the throne and do not go back to tell Herod about their visit with Jesus. They actively make the choice to go home another way so that Herod still won't know where to find Jesus himself. We find out in the passage that comes after what we read this morning that that gives the Holy Family enough time to escape to Egypt.

The story of the Magi's is one of obedience to the movement of God in the world, of generosity to those who God leads you to give to, of going to great lengths to seek out Christ. Those are all important messages, but the one that stuck out to me in a moment such as this, is that the Magi give us an example right from the beginning of Jesus's story that we can bring *ourselves* into our relationship with God and into our faith. We can bring what makes our view of the world unique with us and even more so, it could be vitally important for us to hold onto that thing so we can hear God speaking to us. I think about how my background in Psychology and Spanish has helped to shape my view of the world and the way I understand our faith and the way I build Christian community. I know many of you are or were teachers, I am sure that the way that you hear and serve God has much to do with the skills you honed in that profession. I am sure that is why we have so many good leaders at this church. The Magi are so important to the Nativity story because they show us what it looks like to obey God through scripture and contemporary experience. That is the key. It is not just bringing yourself and your unique set of skills or our collective set of skills to our faith, but marrying it with the direction we can find in our ancient scripture and tradition. The nativity story is one of those stories. In that old text it tells us of our God made flesh, our God with us, our Emmanuel who came to be King and Divine and shake things up so much he would be killed. It tells us of some dudes who traveled a long way to basically be the first FedEx. Bringing in our lens from reading it on January 3, 2021, we are able to then think about what it means for us to live out knowing that Jesus came to be those things for all of us and what it means for us each to obey God's guidance for how to live out God's values in the world today. Perhaps even more relevant in a year such as this,

who should we be looking to as the Magi, who are the unexpected ones that God has been working through to show God's way? Who will be the unexpected and how can we be looking for them so we don't miss God at work in the world?

Let us pray.

O God of wisdom, your voice calls to us as we wander. It thunders in the storms of the nightfall; it sighs in the mists of the morning. It laughs in the leaves at twilight; it sings with the sparrows at dawn.

Your voice falls on the hearts of all who will hear. You do not bequeath to some the privilege of your presence and to others the poverty of your absence. Whether we be rich or poor, weak or strong, fool or sage, your voice speaks to us. And where your voice is heard, the Word is born, and through the Word all things are made new.

All things shall be made new. This is your promise to creation, and what better sign of that promise than a rainbow arising in the midst of the rain, or a birth arriving in the midst of pain. But so often when you set your bow in the sky, we fail to see it, for our eyes are bound to the earth. And too often when you send new life from the womb, we fail to love it, for our hearts are bound to the past.

It is true, Lord. Sometimes we do not welcome what is new. Broken, we do not want an in-breaking. We want to shut our doors against the world when you would have us throw them open and make the world our home. We want to clutch our treasures to our breasts when you would have us go on a pilgrimage to place them in another's hands. We want to repeat our favorite proverbs when you would have us keep silent and kneel at the sound of a baby's cry.

The wise ones kneel before the Child, O God, but Herod plots to kill him. What shall we do, Lord? Who are we that you are mindful of us, that you send the Child to save us?

O Lord of the Magi, help us be wise, but not in the ways of this world. Let us not, like Herod, try to destroy the new; lest we, like Herod, seek to silence the Word.

Radiant God, we have followed your star over "field and fountain, moor and mountain," traveling far to find you. With great joy we have offered you our gifts. And, receiving them, you have lavished upon us the unsearchable riches of Christ. Now, having knelt before you, let us not return to Herod, but let us depart by a new way. Amen.