

“The Stories of the Magi”
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Epiphany
January 6, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Second Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They 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.’” ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Introduction

Today is Epiphany. Though the culture around us celebrates Christmas for one day and then moves on, in the church we know that Christmas is a season that *begins* on December 25th but which last 12 days; that whole “Twelve Days of Christmas” isn’t just a cute Christmas song. Yesterday was the twelfth day. If you were going to surprise your true love with 12 drummers drumming and all the rest, you missed your chance. Today is Epiphany, which marks the end of that Christmas Season. According to Webster’s Dictionary, an epiphany is a manifestation of a divine being. When someone sees God, that is called an “epiphany.” So, in the church, Epiphany is the day when the church celebrates the revelation of God in Christ to the world.

On this day we remember the Magi from the east and the story Matthew tells us of how they travelled from afar to worship the newborn King whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. It is the story of how these

gentiles (that is, non-Jews) came to see God revealed in the infant Jesus and of how they became aware of the truth of God's presence in their midst. It is a story of their epiphany and of ours.

We always associate the Three Wise Men or Magi with Christmas day. No Christmas pageant would be complete without three actors in bathrobes and paper Burger King crowns presenting the infant Jesus with boxes wrapped in tinfoil and with repurposed perfume bottles full of colored water.

But factually, their story does not actually happen on the night of Jesus' birth. It actually takes place some time later; perhaps weeks, months, or even years later. The support for this argument lies in the text of Matthew's story. Matthew reports that the strangers from the east followed the star to the place where the child was and in Matthew 2:11, we find that place is not a stable, it is a house. By the time the Magi arrive, Jesus has already left the stable and (probably) been spirited away into Egypt. It is there that they find him. Which is why we tell their Epiphany story now, almost two weeks after Christmas day.

Most of what we know and remember about these three travelers comes from the Matthew story we just read and from the Christmas Carol "We Three Kings." This morning we will sing that carol, but after each verse we will receive part of the story as told by the Magi themselves. Now, we don't actually have records of these visitors. But many legends and traditions have arisen over the years and some scholarship has been undertaken to better understand who they might have been.

The Reverend Gord Waldie of the United Church of Canada compiled those legends and traditions and mixed them with a healthy dose of creative license to craft a series of stories that I will share with you this morning.¹ The stories are his work. The commentary is my own.

So, I invite you to follow along with the story and to listen and sing, as together we receive it anew.

Congregation sings verse one of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*²

*We three kings of Orient are; bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light*

The Tale of the First Wise Man (Melchior's Story)

My name is Melchior. In the songs you sing and the legends you tell, I was the one who brought the gift of gold to the child. I came from the land of Persia. I was not a king as your song suggests. None of us were in fact. We sometimes advised kings. We sometimes advised those who struggled against kings.

Maybe you would call me a priest? Maybe you would call me an astrologer? I spent my days studying the world and the stars, looking for signs about what would happen. For centuries my ancestors have done just that. We believe that the sky gives us information about what is happening and what *will* happen both in our homeland and in places far away. It is one of the ways the Creator of the World speaks to us.

One night I was taking my regular readings of the sky when something highly unusual caught my eye. A new light in the sky. Quickly I consulted my charts and could find nothing explaining it. So I studied it closely. I watched how it interacted with the other stars in the sky. And soon it was obvious to me that something spectacular was about to happen. The star signified a royal birth. And everything about it suggested it was to happen in the land of the Jews. I needed to learn more.

As it happens there is a tradition in my family that we have a connection to the people of Jerusalem. Many years ago the Babylonians conquered that city and took captives. One of those was a young man named Daniel. He rose high in the esteem of the Babylonian Royal Court, then when my Persian ancestors conquered the Babylonians this same Daniel moved into the service of the Persian King. It is a tradition in my family that Daniel was one of us, that he was in the same group of advisors that we are. For all I know I could be one of his descendants! Because of this we had in our libraries many writings from the Jewish land. I quickly consulted those to see what I could learn.

At any rate I quickly sent messages to my colleagues in other lands, telling them what I had seen and learned. Something this important required that we gave a reply of some sort. We had to go and see in person this thing that had happened. While I was waiting for an answer from my friends I began to prepare to travel. I would need to put together a caravan and gather provisions. No one travels alone in these days, especially over such long distances. But a king had been born. I needed to go and pay him homage, and I would need to bring him a gift...

Congregation sings verse two of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*

*Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

The Tale of the Second Wise Man (Caspar's Story)

My name is Caspar, a scholar from one of the kingdoms in that part of the world you now call India. I brought the gift of frankincense to the child. Like my friend Melchior, I study the night skies for signs and warnings and news. When I too saw the strange new light in the sky I wondered what it could be. As I am still young and inexperienced I asked my mentors what they saw. But they had no idea what this new sign was. All they could tell me was that it was something of great importance. After asking every sage in the kingdom I knew that I had only one other choice.

To the West in Persia was Melchior. Far older than I and much more learned. Quickly I gathered my servants and a small armed escort and started on my way to consult with him. I had barely started out when a messenger from Melchior met me on the road. We made camp and shared a meal together. After the meal I asked him what message he had brought with him. After I had heard it I could not wait any longer. Early the next morning we broke camp and I hastened to meet with Melchior to discuss this news.

When I arrived at his palace I found him preparing to leave. After we had feasted together, I asked him to show me the old Jewish writings he had in his library. I spent an entire night and the whole next day poring over them, pausing only to compare my understandings with Melchior. What I found amazed me!

That next night Melchior and I went up to his observation gallery and watched the night sky again. The light had changed slightly. I looked at Melchior and said "It is done. The child is born." Melchior said nothing, but only nodded in agreement.

While we watched I took some more measurements and consulted the notes I had made. "There is more here than the birth of a king," I said. "My reading of these signs says that God has come to dwell among us." At that very moment we decided that we would leave the next day to go and pay him homage. So in

the morning we gathered our servants and Melchior called on his apprentices to join us. And with a larger armed escort we set out.

Knowing that many cultures burn incense in the presence of God I knew what I needed. And so, when our travels brought us to a town of some size, I sent my most trusted servant out to buy a large quantity of frankincense, so to honor the Child who was God in human form.

Congregation sings verse three of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*

*Frankincense to offer have I: incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, we are raising, worshiping God Most High.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

The Tale of the Third Wise Man (Balthazar's Story)

My name is Balthazar. I come from Arabia and brought Myrrh to lay at the feet of the child. When the first messenger from Melchior arrived, I was stunned because I had not seen the star. How could I have missed such a sign? I spent many hours mulling over the message, wondering what it might mean. I searched the writings we had in our records, I stared at the night sky, I spent time in deep meditation. What should I do?

Then a second messenger came. Melchior had been joined by Caspar from farther East. They were certain that the child was born. Even more they were sure it was more than a human king that had been born, that God had come to Earth. I resolved then and there to join them in their quest to see the child and pay him homage. So I gathered my own servants and a small escort and went to meet them on the road.

In addition to my scholarship I have been blessed with the gift of interpreting dreams. And it was a dream that influenced my choice of gift. My heart carried deep foreboding that this child would someday die at the hands of those he came to save. And so I gathered together a large supply of Myrrh, a burial spice, used to anoint the bodies of the dead before they are placed in the tomb.

After I joined my fellow travelers we continued to the most logical place to go looking for the new King of the Jews. We went to Jerusalem. We were quite a large entourage by this time, with many armed men as an escort. The people around the King were clearly unsure what to make of us.

While we were there our compatriots, men who also studied the ancient writings and the signs of the times, looked into their traditions and told us that we were close to our goal. So, we travelled on and when we found the child and his family, we bowed down to him, and paid him homage. We prostrated ourselves before him as is fit for a mere human in the presence of God.

We then presented our gifts and made ready to return to our homes. Melchior and Caspar had promised the Jewish King, Herod, that we would tell him where the child was to be found. Melchior and Caspar are good men, but foolish. They had obviously not heard about Herod; they did not know his reputation. In Arabia we had heard about how jealous and violent and murderous he was; that he had killed even his own sons in order to protect his position on the throne. Furthermore, I was warned in a dream that if we told Herod where the child was, the child would surely die. Once I told this to my colleagues, the choice was obvious. We bypassed Jerusalem and went home by a different road

Strangely, many years later, I heard stories about a great man who was a preacher, teacher, and healer and who was thought to be God in human form. He was executed, but his followers claimed that he had been risen from the dead. As I investigated the stories I am sure this man Jesus was the same child we visited all those years before. Of him it was said that once people met him they could not follow the same path any longer. They too had to follow a different road.

Congregation sings verse four of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*

*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

Reflection

Another Christmas has come and gone. We've put away the decorations and taken down the tree, right? Our lives go on and the memory of this season may dim. But what should stay with us is the journey of the Magi who did not just see the light, but who followed it and when they found the Christ-child to which it led them, bowed to him in worship and paid him homage.

We focus on the gifts the Magi brought, but it's worth noting that before any gifts were given, the Magi first worshipped. In his commentary on this story, Yale Divinity School professor Thomas Troeger tells us that "The Magi express their relationship to Christ by kneeling and [paying] homage to him. First homage. First worship. First giving themselves utterly and completely to Christ. *Then*, offering their regal gifts."³

This is quite significant for us and for our view of Christmas and the reason we celebrate. Our culture has made Christmas into a celebration of giving and receiving gifts. And we hold up the Magi with their frankincense, gold, and myrrh as the precedent for our own gift-giving. The most important thing about Christmas seems to be finding and buying the right gifts for the people in our lives and making sure that we haven't forgotten anyone important who should receive one. Stores are crammed full of everything imaginable with the expectation that you and I will buy *anything* just to make sure you have *something* for everyone on your list.

But this culture of buying and giving misses the point of the story. Though the gifts of the Magi are important to the story for their symbolism, the magi were driven not by the desire to share their *stuff*, but by the desire to give their whole selves to Christ. Think about that for a second. The gold, frankincense and myrrh we so associate with the Magi, were not even their most important gifts.

So, what does this all mean for us? The legacy of this season is not that cool new gadget you got or the awesome new trinket you gave. The legacy of this season should be lives lived in worship and total submission to Christ. The Magi do not set out for Bethlehem in hopes of receiving some great reward or of cementing for themselves a place of prominence in the realm of this newborn king. No, the primary reason for being there; the reason they embark on this journey from the very beginning, is to surrender themselves to Christ.

Which is a little bit frightening when you think about it. We like to think about God in terms of blessings and gifts received. We like to talk about God's grace and mercy and steadfast love. We like to celebrate the goodness of God and the blessings with which God has filled our lives to overflowing. But making

ourselves subject to God means not just receiving God's good gifts - it also means being subject to God's will and going wherever we are called.

The Monty Python film "Life of Brian" tells the story of the boy who was born just a few doors down from Jesus on that same Christmas night. In the movie, the Magi initially go to the wrong address and find not Jesus, but the infant Brian. When they present his mother with their gifts she replies "Thanks a lot for the gold and frankincense... but don't worry too much about the myrrh next time. All right?"⁴

And that's kind of how we approach Christ sometimes, too. Gold and frankincense are extravagant gifts fit for a king. But myrrh is a reminder of sacrifice and responsibility. Like Bryan's mum, we want to pick and choose. "Thank you for the unconditional love and salvation . . . but not so much with the obligations and responsibilities and sacrifices, all right?"

The story of the Magi reminds us that while Christ's birth was a gift to us, it is also an invitation: an invitation to sacrifice, an invitation to serve, an invitation to worship, an invitation to love; an invitation to follow by a different road.

Congregation sings verse five of *We Three Kings of Orient Are*

*Glorious now behold Him arise; King and God and Sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia, sounds through the earth and skies.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*

End Notes

¹ Waldie, Gord. "Magi Monologues." *Worship Offerings*, Reverend Gord Waldie, United Church of Canada, 13 Dec. 2012, worshipofferings.blogspot.com/2012/12/magi-monologues.html.

² Hopkins, John Henry. "We Three Kings of Orient Are." *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Songs*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990, Hymn #66.

³ Troeger, Thomas. "Matthew 2:1-12, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word. Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, Volume 1*, edited by David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor, Westminster John Knox Pr., 2010, p. 217.

⁴ *Life of Brian*. Dir. Terry Jones. Perf. Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Michael Palin. Cinema International, Orion Pictures, Warner Brothers, 1979. DVD.