

Sunday, January 6, 2019
The Epiphany
Matthew 2.1-12
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As quickly as it started, the 12-day season of Christmas is over and we enter a new season, Epiphany, celebrating the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. Which is also what Christmas is about. So Epiphany is really just a continuation of Christmas. But instead of emphasizing the birth of Jesus, the season of Epiphany emphasizes the ongoing ways in which God is manifest in and through Jesus.

The icon for this season, or at least for the Feast of the Epiphany, is the appearance of the Magi. While we often think of the Magi as being part of the Christmas story, they really are not. This is because in our imagination we have conflated Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus with Matthew's account of the Magi. In reality, these are two different stories, with the Magi arriving not on the night Jesus was born, but rather sometime later. Based on Herod's actions later in Matthew's story, the Magi could have arrived up to two years after Jesus' birth.

Very little is known about the Magi. Just that they travel to Bethlehem from the East, and that they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But despite knowing so little about the Magi, we have placed great significance on them. And have built up so much mythology based on so little information. Lest anyone be concerned with my intentionally calling this mythology, know that here I use mythology not as "fake news" but in its classical definition, which is a popular belief or assumption that has grown up around someone or something. In this sense, mythology is the act of using popular imagery to convey a greater truth.

Because of observation of a mysterious star, it is thought that the Magi were likely astrologers, possibly Zoroastrian priests who engaged in astrological observation and the divination of omens. Through their observations, they somehow discerned that the star was an omen, a sign, that the king of the Jews had been born. How, we do not know. Probably by relating the omen to some ancient prophetic texts that are lost to antiquity. Or possibly they had a deeper understanding of the prophecies contained in the Hebrew Scriptures.

When confronted with the possibility that there is a King of the Jews who has just been born, the chief priests and scribes consult Old Testament prophecies to see if they can determine if such a king is likely and if so, where he is likely to have been born. In Micah 5.2 they find a prophecy that a shepherd king like David would be born in Bethlehem. A king who would bring peace to the land. Who would restore Israel to her former glory, with prosperity and security.

While Matthew does not tell us how many Magi there were, telling us only that they were "wise men from the East," the assumption has been there were three because they brought three gifts. But as someone quipped following our Christmas pageant where we had four Magi, there may have been more than three but they all chipped in on only three gifts. Based on this assumption of three Magi, and even though we are told that they are from the East, we have also built up a legend that they represent Asia, Africa, and Europe, and Asia, which was the

extent of the known world at the time Jesus was born. They are therefore commonly depicted as being black, white, and Asian. The rationale behind this is that these Magi were the first Gentiles, the first non-Jews, to recognize who Jesus was and to worship him. The first to recognize that God had revealed himself to humanity. Not just to the Jews, but to all humanity. Therefore, it has become common to represent them as being of the different races of the then-known world, to indicate that Jesus is the Lord of all humanity. Emphasizing our understanding that the celebration of The Epiphany proclaims that Jesus came for the salvation of the entire world.

As to the gifts brought by our mysterious travelers, there is also significance and meaning attached to those. Traditionally gold represents wealth and power, particularly of kings. So the Magi give gold to symbolize that Jesus will be a great king; to symbolize his kingship over all humanity. Frankincense is a resin that was traditionally used by many different religions in their worship practices. Particularly in Judaism it was used in the Temple as an offering to God. The Old Testament references frankincense as a symbol of the Divine name, as well as an emblem of prayer. So the Magi give frankincense to symbolize the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God. And myrrh is a resin that was often used in burial rites as a form of embalming. So the Magi give myrrh to symbolize the fact that even as this child has just been born, that his death will be of particular significance.

As the first Gentiles to recognize precisely who Jesus is, and to present precious gifts symbolizing their understanding of who Jesus is, these mysterious visitors are, in a sense, our forefathers in the faith. They are the first Gentiles to worship Jesus for who he is—the Son of God. In paying homage to Jesus and bringing expensive gifts, the Magi model for us what it means to worship Jesus as our King.

We regularly come to worship Jesus, as did the Magi. But the model of the Magi bringing gifts raises the question—what gifts do we bring to this King? Most of us are not in a position to bring such expensive and lavish gifts as gold, frankincense, and myrrh to prove our devotion. Okay, you could argue that our giving of money in our pledges and offerings are effectively the same as giving gold. But the symbolism behind gold is far greater than throwing a couple of bucks in the offering plate.

If the Magi and what they do as our forefathers in the faith is so significant to who we are as Christians, maybe we need to pay more attention to what they are doing. To what they represent. To what they give. So I ask again, what gifts do we bring to this King? What gifts of great worth do we truly give to this King as a way of demonstrating our love and devotion?

As I pondered this question, I found the answer in my childhood memories. In what, to this day, is still my favorite Christmas show, “The Little Drummer Boy.” I used to watch it as a child, and then a few years ago I ran across a DVD of it. Since then, I make it a point to watch it every Christmas season. I don’t know what took me so long, but just this year, I realized “The Little Drummer Boy” is not a Christmas story, but is really an Epiphany story.

For those of you not familiar with, or who might have forgotten about this gem, it was a stop motion animated TV special that premiered in December of 1968—50 years ago. While a crude

production by today's standards, what is portrayed is poignant and continues to be applicable to our lives of faith.

"The Little Drummer Boy" is an animated story version of the Christmas song by the same name. I'll spare you the song's lyrics, with its repetition of "Pa rum pum pum pum." But what is important is that it tells the story of a young Jewish boy named Aaron, who has deep-seated anger with and hatred for all of humanity because desert bandits killed his parents. All Aaron has left are three animal friends—Samson the donkey, Joshua the camel, and Baba the lamb—and a drum his parents gave him for his birthday shortly before they were killed. Aaron's only joy in life is playing the drum for his animal friends, who respond by dancing.

Through a series of events, Aaron has an initial encounter with the Magi as they follow the star to Bethlehem. Later, Aaron and his animal companions rejoin the Magi in Bethlehem, where Baba is hit by a Roman chariot. Aaron takes the dying lamb to the Magi to be healed. However, they can do nothing. One of the kings tells Aaron, "There is a king among kings who would save your little friend." At the king's suggestion, Aaron goes to the Baby Jesus in the manger and recognizes there is definitely something special about this child. Following the lead of the Magi, Aaron wants to give a gift to the Baby as a means of imploring him to heal Baba. Having no material possession to give, Aaron offers the only thing he has. His gift is to play his drum for the Baby and his parents. The Baby smiles with pleasure at the gift Aaron offers. Baba is immediately healed and runs into Aaron's arms, and he finally feels joy and love for the first time since the death of his parents. The real lesson here is that Aaron gave the most valuable gift he could give. He gave the gift of himself.

At Christmas, we celebrate the greatest gift of all. The fact that God, out of love for us, came in the flesh, in the form of his Son Jesus. At Epiphany, and through the season between Epiphany and Lent, we celebrate the many ways that God continues to be manifest through Jesus' life and ministry in the world. In the season of Epiphany, we celebrate the ways that God through Jesus continues to gift us with his life, with his presence, and with his love.

The example of the Magi shows us Epiphany is not just a time of God revealing himself to us. It is also a time of our giving to God. That our response to Jesus in our lives is to give gifts of great value in return. As a sign of the depth and sincerity of our worship. As a sign of our love. The example of Aaron, the Little Drummer Boy, shows us that there is a gift we can give to the Christ Child that is far more precious than gold, frankincense, or myrrh. We can give the gift of ourselves. We can give the gift of our time. We can give the gift of our talents. We can give the gift of our love and compassion for God's beloved children. Whatever comes from that deep place within. Whatever truly expresses our joy at being in the presence of the Christ Child. Whatever truly expresses the love we have for and the love we receive from the Christ Child.

As we begin this new season, as we begin this new year, I invite you to follow the star. I invite you to gaze upon the Christ Child, God's gift to you. And I invite you to consider, what gift will you lay before our King?