

**Sunday, January 5, 2025**

**Epiphany**

Matthew 2.1-12

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/490644910750008>

*(Sermon begins at about 25:00)*

**“Guide Us to Thy Perfect Light”**

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. “Epiphany” meaning “showing forth,” “revealing,” “manifestation.” This feast day is dedicated to celebrating the revealing or manifestation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles—to non-Jews, to all of us. While we commonly think of Epiphany as the arrival of the Magi following Jesus’ birth at Bethlehem, it is technically a commemoration of three different ways in which Jesus is revealed to the Gentiles: the coming of the Magi, Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, and Jesus performing his first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana. In our liturgical readings, we don’t always hear all three of these “epiphanies.” But this is one of those years when, over the next few weeks, we do hear all three of these stories.

While those other “epiphanies” are important to the overall revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, we do routinely emphasize the coming of the Magi this time of year, either at the tail end of the Christmas season or in a separate celebration of Epiphany, such as we are doing today. Likely because its theme connects so closely with the birth of Jesus we have just celebrated at Christmas. To the point that the Wise Men are commonly incorporated into the birth narrative, at least in Christmas Eve pageants and images on Christmas cards and the like. But the arrival of the Magi is not a Christmas story. It is its own thing, with its own special meaning.

There are really two important aspects to the story of the Magi. Two aspects that come together to be the most obvious image for Epiphany, for the revealing of Jesus to the Gentiles. These are the Magi themselves, and the gifts they bring. All the other details of the Gospel account and of the musical interpretations we hear this season merely provide supporting details.

First, the Magi themselves. All we really know about them is what we hear in our Gospel reading from Matthew. Admittedly, popular understanding of the story is perhaps better known and mediated through today’s Sequence Hymn, “We Three Kings.” Now with all due respect to that hymn, the song isn’t quite an accurate portrayal of the story. Or rather, of the Magi themselves. While most of the lyrics are faithful to the Gospel story, there are, in fact, a few things that are just flat out wrong. Namely the most basic of facts. We three kings? Yeah, no. We don’t know for sure how many there were. Maybe three, maybe not. And the mysterious gift bearers were not kings. Our English translation of Matthew’s account refers to them as “wise men.” Although the original term used is “magi,” which was a term for priests of the Zoroastrian religion—a religion centered in Persia, present day Iran.

Magi were practitioners of esoteric knowledge—a mash-up of what we would consider part science, part magic. This esoteric knowledge included, among other things, knowledge of astronomy and astrology. As we hear in the Gospel account, the Magi travel to Israel because

they have observed an unusual star that appeared in the west. They somehow discern that its timing and location indicated the birth of “the child who has been born king of the Jews.” Whatever their sources for this determination, it was compelling enough that they determined to actually follow the star to see where and to whom it would lead them. An interesting turn of events. To be priests and practitioners of their own religion, and yet moved to seek one who is king of another religion altogether indicates some pretty compelling evidence. Indicating profound faith on their part. Faith that even transcended their own belief system. In this, they demonstrate an openness to a greater truth. To the truth that this newborn king was, in fact, born for all people.

As to number, we just don’t know how many there were. At least in popular culture, it is commonly assumed there were three because they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But in actuality, we don’t know. Referred to as “wise men,” plural, indicates there were at least two. But there could have been many more. Frankly, the actual number is really immaterial to the story and its true meaning. Although, some additional lore has developed around the Magi based on 1) the fact that they were Gentiles and 2) the assumption that there were three of them. Lore intended to further emphasize their role as being representative of all humanity. In some traditions, the three are depicted as being White, Black, and Asian. Representing the three primary racial groups known at the time. Indicating that Jesus is the savior of all people, regardless of race or ethnicity. And in some traditions, the three are depicted as varying ages: young, middle-aged, and old. Again, indicating that Jesus is the savior of all, regardless of age or stage of life. Sadly, the Magi do not represent any differences regarding sex or gender identity. But then again, we continue to deal with the influences of patriarchy. We won’t hold that against the Magi. The important thing being that they are intended to represent all humanity. The fact that Christ came to provide salvation for all humanity. And, in their seeking of the Christ Child, that we are all to do likewise.

The other significant aspect of the visit of the Magi is obviously the gifts they bring. We are told they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the newborn king of the Jews. Each of these gifts has a particular significance as applied to the one they seek. Each gift saying something about who this “king of the Jews” is and of his destiny. First is gold which traditionally represents monarchy. The gift providing recognition that the One they seek will be a king. As they reported to Herod, the One they recognize as being the king of the Jews. And we, in the Christian tradition, do sometimes use the language of Christ as being our king. Next is frankincense which traditionally represents priesthood. Incense in general and particularly frankincense was used in the ceremonies and rituals of a number of religions of the day. The gift providing recognition that the One they seek would be holy. Of course, we recognize Jesus as holy by virtue of being the Son of God. And he is sometimes referred to in sacred writings as being a high priest. And finally is myrrh, which traditionally represents suffering and death. Myrrh being a resin sometimes used in the burial process. Some cultures, including Jews, often used myrrh in the preparation of bodies for burial. The gift of myrrh representing the suffering and death Jesus would experience. Christ’s Passion being the means by which we receive salvation, the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life. In fact, we are told in John’s Gospel that Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus’ body for burial using a mixture of myrrh and aloes. Taken together, these three gifts foretell who Jesus was destined to become: a priestly king who would experience suffering and death for the sake of humanity.

The Magi seeking the newborn Christ Child represents the fact that Christ came not just for his own people, the Jews, but for Gentiles, as well. For all people. The fact that Matthew has this as the first real story in his Gospel is telling. One of the major themes of Matthew's Gospel is that God's salvation, enabled and implemented through Jesus, is for all people. The visit of the Magi serves to foreshadow the message of inclusion that runs throughout this Gospel. The Magi being the first Gentiles to recognize who Jesus is and his role as the one who brings salvation to all humanity. The Magi being the first Gentiles to intentionally seek him out. In this, the Magi serve a significant function. Not just representing Gentiles, but also serving as our guides to seeking the Christ Child, as well. Pointing the way to who he is through the gifts they bring: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gifts fitting a priestly king who would suffer and die for his people. A priestly king who would suffer and die for all humanity.

Perhaps this is the most important role the Magi serve. That, regardless of who we are, they help point the way to the source of salvation for all humanity. They were willing to look at the signs, at the evidence. They were willing to travel great distances in search of their goal. This role as guide, as the ones who point the way, is profoundly evident in one aspect of the story that is so subtle it is often overlooked. Something we actually get wrong in all our depictions of the birth narrative and of the visit of the Magi. So many of our Christmas cards and other imagery of the Christmas season depict a bright star shining on the stable where Jesus was born. Pointing the way for the Magi and for all who seek to pay the newborn Jesus homage. And yet, Matthew's account indicates this was not actually the case. Only the Magi seem to be aware of and how to find that particular star amongst the myriad stars in the night sky. Herod and his advisors had not seen the star for themselves. They did not even know of its existence until the Magi presented themselves to Herod, inquiring, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" And going on to explain, "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Even then, it is apparent that Herod's advisors, the chief priests, did not see it, were not able to tell where it was. They had to try to discern by other means, by consulting ancient prophecies about where the Messiah was to be born. They are only able to discern where the star might be pointing through the guidance of the Magi.

This overlooked fact indicates that there is sometimes a hiddenness when it comes to Jesus and who he is, where we are to find him. That Christ often presents himself, makes himself known to us, in small and often unnoticed ways. He seeks to make himself known, but sometimes, as with Herod and his advisors, as with so many others who did not notice the star either, Christ makes himself known in subtle ways. Such as coming in the form of a baby born in an out-of-the-way place like Bethlehem. Often times, we need guides, like the Magi—those who are open to noticing and seeing in a different way—to help us to see where Christ may be in our own lives.

Epiphany is a celebration of the fact that Christ has come to provide salvation for all humanity. Although, we may not always be able to see him for ourselves. Sometimes we need guides to help us to find him. As the refrain to "We Three Kings" implores, "O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light!" As the star guided the Magi to find the One they sought, so may the profound faith of these wise man, how ever many there may have been, likewise guide us to Christ's perfect light.