

Sunday, January 4, 2026
The Epiphany
Matthew 2.1-12
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“The Journey of the Magi”

Before I start, I beg indulgence and forgiveness from the liturgical purists in the crowd. As a matter of transparency, while we are celebrating Epiphany today, today is not actually Epiphany. Epiphany is actually January 6th—which is this coming Tuesday. Today is actually the second Sunday of Christmas. You see, Christmastide—the Twelve Days of Christmas—run from sundown on Christmas Eve through January 5th. And yet, while being two distinct seasons, Christmas and Epiphany overlap thematically. Christmas transitioning into Epiphany. Christmas is obviously about the birth of Jesus. Epiphany, meaning “showing forth,” focuses on the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God, particularly to the Gentiles. The iconic image of this manifestation, this showing forth, being our Gospel reading for today, about the visit of the Magi. Of course, in popular culture, the stories of Christmas and Epiphany are conflated into one event, with many depictions of the birth of Jesus including the arrival of the Magi. Not historically accurate, but we can work with it. So, just as secular culture plays a little fast and loose with the coming of the Wise Men, we can, too, in our liturgical commemorations: bringing together the meanings of Christmas and Epiphany into this transition period between seasons as we prepare to end our celebration of Christmastide and move into our commemoration of Epiphanytide. And this actually works particularly well given the movement of our Gospel reading for today (which, by the way, is also one of the options for the Second Sunday of Christmas, so even the framers of the lectionary recognized the nebulous, more transitory nature of this particular Sunday).

Just as we are moving from one season—Christmas—into another—Epiphany—today’s Gospel is about movement. It is about a journey, on multiple levels: literal and metaphorical, physical and spiritual.

The literal, physical journey is readily apparent in the Gospel, in the language used, in the actions reported. “Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” “We have come to pay him homage.” “Then [Herod] sent them to Bethlehem.” After hearing Herod, “They set out.” After finding Jesus, paying homage, and giving their gifts, “They left for their own country by another road.” Three legs of a long journey: from their home in the east, likely Persia, to Jerusalem; from Jerusalem to Bethlehem; and from Bethlehem back home. This literal, physical journey being sacramental in nature. As you recall from your Catechism (page 857 of your *Book of Common Prayer*), “sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace.” And while sacraments typically refer to specific liturgical rites and rituals, such as Eucharist and Baptism, among others, the outward physical journey the Magi make from Persia to Jerusalem to Bethlehem and back to Persia undoubtedly coincided with a parallel spiritual journey in the lives of the Magi. A spiritual journey that serves as a model for the spiritual lives, for the faith journey, of all who follow Jesus.

The specifics of the inward spiritual journey the Magi make, individually and collectively, are not recorded. We can only make educated guesses based on the facts of their outward physical journey. But this is enough for our purposes. For as in any spiritual journey, what happens is unique to the individual. And more often than not, the inward spiritual journey is not fully realized or even understood by the individual. The spiritual journey being a lifelong one that the individual rarely if ever is able to see in its entirety as if on a map, but rather is viewed in bits and pieces, in glimpses revealed at any given moment depending on where we are and what is going on in other areas of our lives.

Based on what Matthew records of the Magi's journey, it is obvious their trip to Bethlehem was not just on a whim. This trip has been in the making for a long time. The physical travel alone, being estimated at nearly 1,000 miles, would have taken months on foot or by pack animal across open desert. The terrain and climate alone would have made the trip, particularly with an entourage, slow-going. But even before they set out on their road trip, the Magi would have had a lot of groundwork to do. Given that they were guided by a star, the presumption is that the Magi were not kings as conveyed in popular songs, but rather were priests and scholars. Likely Zoroastrian astronomers. They would have first had to discover the star that would lead them on their journey. With all due respect to artistic representations, it is not very likely the star was the bright shining object, brighter than any other celestial body visible at night, that we see in religious and secular art. That it was not a star that was so bright it could not be missed. Matthew's account suggests that only the Magi noticed the star; that neither Herod nor his court scholars even had a clue about the existence of this star until the Magi showed up. Indicating that the star actually appeared just like any other star in the sky. That it was only made clear to the Magi based on their superior knowledge of astronomy and likely discovered only after extensive observation and calculation. Even with modern astronomic devices and methods, identification of anomalous celestial objects can take long periods of observation.

Regardless of the specifics, it is reasonable to assume that the Magi, through the course of their astronomical work, somehow stumbled upon this apparently strange phenomenon. In their curiosity, they worked diligently over a long period of time to figure out just what it was and what it meant. Which speaks to a significant aspect of their spiritual journey: that they were not only observant of the world—of the cosmos—around them; but that they were also open to trying to figure out what they were seeing. To seek the meaning behind it. More specifically, that they were open to discerning how God was at work in the world and cosmos around them. Whatever the evidence they discovered and the meaning they discerned, it was obviously of such a spectacular nature that it caused them to question their own religious beliefs and values. They would have had to do research to try to make meaning out of this, undoubtedly digging into archaic, ancient texts and prophecies that are now lost to us. But yet, which gave them sufficient reason to believe that this celestial phenomenon was pointing to something greater than themselves, and greater than their own religion, even greater than their own god. To realize that star was literally pointing to something of divine significance.

This would have had to have been an extensive amount of work, requiring extensive time to complete and to interpret. Likely with them testing and retesting their work, reexamining their conclusions, before even thinking about setting off on a 1,000 mile journey to some unknown place in the west. Their conclusion proving so compelling that they had no choice but to embark

on this journey. If nothing else, to more fully explain and substantiate the spiritual journey they had already embarked on. To establish and seek to be in relationship with the Divine One this star seemed to be pointing to.

Their spiritual journey must have been deepened and strengthened as they made the physical journey west. Likely testing and retesting calculations, hypotheses, and conclusions on the way. Making sure they were on track physically, but also spiritually. To the point that when they neared the location they were looking for, the Magi, excited to share their insights, presented themselves to the local authority: to King Herod. Surely he and his scholars were also aware of this magnificent phenomenon and the event it pointed to. Although apparently not.

Thankfully for us and for history, the Magi were on the right track. In their faithfulness to their sacred quest, they proved themselves to be faithful to the God who made all this possible, to the God who set this whole plan for the Incarnation into motion. Whether they actually knew that God or not, they had proved themselves, by virtue of their journey—physical and spiritual—to be open to possibilities. To be open to whatever this foreign God was willing to show them. In their faithfulness to this God, this God was faithful to them and to their enterprise. Having had their initial conclusions born out, having seen the newborn King of the Jews and paying him homage, they were more certain than ever. They were open to whatever mysteries this King and his God would show them. Even warnings in a dream from a divine messenger. Warnings to protect this newborn King. And perhaps, even warnings to protect themselves.

That is the last we hear of the Magi. “Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” I can’t help but wonder what happened to them. Not just on their physical journey back to Persia, but also in their spiritual journey. Not just on that return trip, but through the rest of their lives. They had devoted so much time and energy and resources to pursuing an initial nudge from God observed in the form of an obscure celestial phenomenon, resulting in them finding the King of the Jews. Not just King of the Jews, but a King for all people: the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Paying him homage. Giving him incredibly valuable gifts representing who this King is and would become. How could that experience, from start to finish, not have had a significant impact on their lives? On their spiritual lives and the resulting impact on the way they lived their lives thereafter.

The Magi are commonly said to represent all Gentiles who come seeking the Christ Child. We see this depicted in how they are represented in art: one being Black, one being Asian, and one being Caucasian—meant to represent all peoples of the then known world. The Magi being the ultimate models, being the guides and forefathers of all Gentiles who come to know Jesus, and who come to know God through him. In our own lives of faith, in our own spiritual lives, we make a similar journey as the Magi did two millennia ago. It all starts by being open to observing how God works in the world around us. To be curious, to be open and willing to take a second look, to go deeper, to seek to know and experience this Divine presence for ourselves. To seek out those who can guide us in that journey of exploration. A journey that is at the same time a journey of exploring and coming to know the Living God in our midst, but also a journey of self-exploration, and coming to know who we are as beloved children of God. A journey that, like that of the Magi, does not end with our meeting the Christ Child and offering the gift of

ourselves. It is a journey that continues on. As we continue our physical journey through life, we are forever changed by what we witness at the manger in Bethlehem. An experience that by its very nature, sets us on a new spiritual path, where we too, return to our own country by another road.

Merry Christmas, Happy Epiphany, and Blessings on your Journey