

Epiphany Sunday A  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 8, 2023

*“An Apostrophe, An Epiphany”*  
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*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>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.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>‘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.’” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>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.”*

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

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How many of you have seen Steven Spielberg's 1991 classic film, *Hook*? I love that film! There's one particular scene, a conversation between the dreaded Captain Hook and his loyal lackey and first mate Smee that always makes me laugh. In a moment of complete seriousness Smee tells Hook: "I've just had an apostrophe." Hook responds, "I think you mean an epiphany." Smee continues, "No...lightning has just struck my brain." And Hook quips back, "Well, that must hurt." I love that scene and honestly, it sheds a little light on the meaning of the liturgical season of Epiphany which begins today. Epiphany is about revelation. It's about light illumining the mystery of God's promised one. It's a lightning strike to the brain that originated in Bethlehem with the birth of Jesus.

Friday was the 12<sup>th</sup> day after Christmas, the Feast of the Epiphany, and the day the church traditionally celebrates the arrival of magi from the East with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the infant Christ. There are, however, more than a couple of inconsistencies in the way the church typically portrays this scene. I'd like to begin by exploring those in a bit more detail.

Firstly, the magi were not kings. Per the description in Matthew's gospel, it's more likely that the magi were astronomers from the east—possibly Persia—they knew how to track stars and assigned special meaning to the astrological phenomena they observed. We don't know that the magi were all men and we certainly don't know that there were three of them.

Secondly, while they make a beautiful addition to our nativity scenes, Christmas pageants, and story-book retellings of the Christmas story, the gospels make no connection between the magi and the stable. In Luke's gospel the nativity story with stable, angels, and shepherds ends when the shepherds return to the fields. In Matthew's gospel, there is no stable event at all and the magi come, not to an infant Jesus in a stable, but to a child Jesus in a house. The gospels of Mark and John make no mention of Jesus' birth. So our classic Christmas story of stable, angels, shepherds, and wise men is actually a combination of two different stories of Jesus'

birth—one from the Gospel According to Matthew and the other from the Gospel According to Luke.

Thirdly, there's a lot of speculation as to the meaning of the magi's gifts. Some say that gold symbolized Jesus' future kingship, that frankincense, a valuable substance offered to God as a burnt offering, represented Jesus' divinity, and myrrh, a burial ointment, foreshadowed Jesus' death and resurrection. I tend to think that there's not much to be gained by assigning symbolic values to the magi's gifts. They were, however, all expensive gifts suggesting that our magi were people of means and they intended to honor Jesus with costly, albeit impractical, gifts.

There's a popular meme that suggests if there had been "Three Wise Women" instead of "Three Wise Men," "They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts [some versions suggest diapers], cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and there would be peace on earth."<sup>1</sup> But that's not how the story goes.

Instead, our magi simply followed a star, ended up in Jerusalem asking the wicked puppet-king Herod for directions to the new king. Herod was not happy. A new king would be a threat to Herod's ill-gotten power and a potentially destabilizing factor in the tenuous Judeo-Roman peace. These magi showed up with the worst possible news of a new king and treasure chests loaded with gifts to honor him with. But Herod was shrewd. He inquired of the priests and scribes as to where the Messiah was to be born. When he learned that it was Bethlehem, a tiny village only nine miles away, he told the magi and urged them to return with news so that he too could travel to pay homage to the new king. The magi followed the star until it stopped over the house where Jesus was. Matthew tells us that they were overjoyed. After presenting Jesus with their gifts, they wisely returned home by a different route, avoiding another meeting with the treacherous King Herod.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Lindemen Allen. "The Gifts We Give," Politicaltheology.com, December 31, 2018: <https://politicaltheology.com/the-gifts-we-give-matthew-21-12/>.

Even without the stable, the shepherds, or the angels, Matthew's is still a really good story. But at its core, it's really not a story about magi, it's a story about Jesus. Matthew's magi had a revelation about Jesus—the first of several similar revelations that mark the season of Epiphany. If nothing else, they knew that he was special. The revelation of the magi is significant for several reasons, but chief among them is the simple fact that the magi were neither Jewish nor Christian. Instead, Matthew probably envisioned Persian sages—Zoroastrians, faithful to an ancient monotheistic religion that predates both Christianity and modern Judaism. The magi didn't convert to the Judaism of Jesus' parents and they certainly didn't become Christians—Christianity wouldn't have existed yet—but they did recognize that something special had happened with the birth of Jesus and it was worth traveling over a thousand miles to see it firsthand. They had an epiphany, a revelation, and they followed the light of that shining star all the way to Bethlehem.

In the religiously diverse and divided world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this story paints a hopeful picture of what can happen when we throw off the labels that divide people into religious and political categories of 'us' and 'them.' It illustrates the truth that we can find beauty, depth, and consolation in the faith of another person—even another religion—without betraying our own faith. It reminds us that the miracle of Christmas is meant to be experienced firsthand. Epiphany is the season of light. May the light of Christmas, the light of hope, peace, joy, and love shine on each of us this new season—even from unexpected places. And may we each experience a fresh revelation, a new Epiphany of God-With-Us and with our world. Amen.