

The Magi: An Epiphany Story

Matthew 2:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Ah, the story of the beloved wise men! Three kings kneeling so reverently near the manger, alongside the shepherds, worshipping the newborn baby Jesus as the adoring parents look on.

This, of course, is the visual scene that is portrayed on Christmas cards, in countless Christmas pageants, in the typical Nativity scene we set up in our homes, on the Nativity banner here in the sanctuary, and even on this morning's bulletin cover. We also picture this scene every time we sing the famous carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," which we will be singing in a few moments.

But guess what, **there's something not quite right with this picture.** For when we take a close look at the actual biblical account of this story we discover that the image most of us carry around in our mind is incorrect. To begin with, a vast majority of biblical scholars believe that this story doesn't take place at the exact time of Jesus' birth, when, for instance, the shepherds came to visit him. Neither does it occur just 12 days later when the Church celebrates the Day of Epiphany.

The actual day of Epiphany, by the way, is always on January 6, which is 12 days after Christmas, December 25. As has become a College Hill tradition, we will be having a very meaningful service of worship that evening, which will be this Thursday at 6:30 pm.

Epiphany, however, is more than a single day on the liturgical church calendar. It also happens to be an entire season of the church year, lasting from January 6 until the First Sunday of Lent.

The focus of this season is on the revelation of the divine presence in our midst. The biblical story of the wise men is classified as an epiphany story because it is through their encounter with the child Jesus that they experienced the divine presence of God in their midst.

The Greek word *epiphany* literally means an appearance or manifestation, particularly of the divine, or an illuminating discovery, especially one that comes unexpectedly. We often call these "Aha" moments. **This season also recognizes the symbolic "light" that Jesus brought into the world.**

You may be wondering how is it that the statement can be made that the wise men didn't show up immediately after Jesus' birth. Perhaps the main reason is that following this particular story in Matthew's gospel is the horrific account of King Herod the Great having every Jewish male child in and around Bethlehem *two years old* and under put to death. If the wise men arrived at the exact time of Jesus' birth, the thinking goes, why would Herod have wanted every child up to two years old put to death? This has led many biblical scholars, therefore, to believe that the wise men's visit, if indeed it even was an historical event at all, could have been up to two years *after* Jesus was

born. There are other elements about this story that are based on tradition instead of the Scriptural account as well.

Just for fun, let's take a look at the words from that old favorite Christmas carol, which we have now learned isn't really a Christmas carol at all but an Epiphany carol, **We Three Kings of Orient Are**. I'll stop every time there is a discrepancy between the traditional story and the actual biblical narrative.

"We three," STOP. Three? Did you hear any mention in the Bible that there were three people who came to visit Jesus? Nope. That number was assigned much later because of the three gifts that were given. There may have been three or three hundred people as far as we know.

Let's start again. "We three kings," STOP. Where does it say that these folks, however many of them there were, were kings? Nowhere. That was just assumed because of the quality and expense of the three gifts. Also, it sent the theological message that rulers of other nations would bow down before the Christ child and the God of Israel.

And though it isn't mentioned in the song, I want to share that biblical scholars now think that the term **'wise men' is not a very good translation of the biblical word in Greek, "magi."** We know from history that magi were people of science, perhaps even of magic. (Notice that the word "magic" is magi with a 'c' added on the end.) It is believed that magi served as advisors and counselors to kings and who certainly were considered to be wise. They most likely interpreted dreams and combined both the modern day practices of astronomy and astrology. But whatever they were, they weren't kings. Ignoring this, later tradition – hundreds of years later – even went as far as to give them names and specific kingdoms: Balthazar, king of Arabia; Melchior, king of Persia; and Gaspar, king of India. How's that for embellishing a story.

Did Matthew have all these embellishments in mind when he wrote of this account of the magi journeying to present gifts and worship the child who they believed to be the Messiah? Almost certainly not.

Now, I bring all this up this morning not to needlessly ruin your image of the manger scene or this hymn. Rather, I think it is an important and poignant example of how organized religion, the Christian Church throughout the ages, embellishes biblical accounts, sometimes to serve its own purposes.

If the **Protestant Reformation** that began in the early 1500s was about anything, however, it was about **separating what is actually written in the Scriptures from what church tradition has added on**. I am among those that strongly believe that we should continue this practice.

Well, after stripping away most of the traditional story of the wise men, what are we left with? I think Matthew was trying to make at least three main points.

The **first** is that much of this story, including the naming of the city of Bethlehem, King David's hometown, and the gifts of gold and frankincense (which are mentioned in Isaiah 60), are fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. The Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, contained so many prophecies about the circumstances surrounding the coming of the Messiah that **it was of utmost importance to the gospel writer Matthew, and his original Jewish/Christian audience, that the story of Jesus' birth reflect the fulfillment of these prophecies. This has lead most progressive biblical scholars to conclude that these birth narratives themselves, then, were the construction of the gospel writer, not actual history. But that doesn't negate the importance of their meaning.**

The **second point** is that if these magi came somewhere from the East, they would not have been Jews. Jews at that time, however, considered themselves to be God's *only* chosen and redeemed people. So it is very significant that these magi who came from afar were pagan Gentiles.

This biblical narrative clearly indicates, then, that **God's love, grace, and even redemption, is extended to all people**, regardless of race, religion, or any other characteristic. So with a deeper look into this biblical story we see that it is one of **radical inclusiveness**. This is a biblical theme, in my opinion, that can never be emphasized enough.

This epiphany story becomes a celebration of the breaking down of dividing walls. Epiphany, therefore, challenges us to reconsider all the people who we see as outsiders or as unworthy. Biblical commentator Richard Donovan states this particular point of the story this way:

Epiphany challenges us to abandon our tribalism (racially, nationally, denominationally, etc.) and to expand our tents to welcome even those whom we would prefer not to love. It is a burning issue, because loving those outside our tribe is difficult – but Christ makes it possible. That is the Epiphany message.

Matthew makes it clear that the **barriers that separate people from each other do not separate them from God's love, or from experiencing God's presence.**

Perhaps you have felt like an outsider or unworthy at one point or another in your life, only to come to the realization that **you are included in God's love and grace.**

The **third point** I think Matthew was trying to make was to compare the magi's worshipful response to the birth of Jesus to the response of King Herod, who at that time was the king of the Jews. The irony is that while these Gentiles, as outsiders, came to worship Jesus and joyously bring him gifts, the Jewish king, as an insider, tried to kill him. Historically, this has been a common response by those in power who feel their control threatened.

So there you have it, the first epiphany story in the New Testament, a story in which **God is revealed and becomes manifest to humanity through the person of Jesus, the Christ.** There are other epiphany stories throughout the gospels that we will deal with as they come along in the lectionary readings throughout the year.

Finally, let me just mention that perhaps you have had an epiphany moment in your life, an "aha" moment when you felt God was revealed and made manifest to you; a time when you felt the presence of the divine or a revelation of a deep spiritual mystery. Reflect upon those moments during this season of Epiphany, and continue to look for God's presence within yourself and within others, in the situations you find yourself in during this New Year, and certainly in the world around us.

Amen.