

Gifts Fit for a King
Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany, Year C January 5, 2024
Choptank Charge Pastor Nan Duerling

Welcome on this fifth day of 2024, which is also the twelfth day of the Twelve days of Christmas! We're actually celebrating Epiphany today, which always falls on January 6th. However, as is true most years, we're not in church on that date to celebrate, so we celebrate it the Sunday before. But what is Epiphany anyway, and why do we celebrate it?

An "epiphany" is a revelation or showing forth or manifestation. Although this word is part of our church calendar, we also use it when the light bulb goes off in our heads and we see something clearly that we hadn't realized before. Maybe you had an epiphany when you suddenly knew that the person you had been dating was the one you wanted to spend your life with. Or perhaps you were taking a class when you just knew that what you were learning here held the key to your vocational future.

More specifically, Epiphany as it is used in the church marks two different events. In our Western Church, it's remembered as the day the Wise Men came to worship Jesus. The Eastern churches, such as the Greek Orthodox community, celebrate Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan River on this date. We will commemorate that event next Sunday. In addition to these differences, it's important to note that festivities on January 6th predated and were considered—and in some places still are—more important than Christmas. On that date, known as the Three Kings Day, gifts were—and still are—given. Epiphany brings the Advent-Christmas cycle of the church year to a close. Clearly, many traditions have taken root in various cultures over the centuries, but those in the Western church are all rooted in today's Bible story from Matthew 2:1-12.

You might wonder why we can be so sure they are "all" rooted here. The reason for certainty is that Matthew is the only Gospel writer who records this story. Recall that only Matthew and Luke have Nativity stories, and only Matthew talks about the Magi coming, which sets the stage for the urgent flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. Matthew takes great care to draw parallels between Jesus and Moses, both of whom began life amid dangerous circumstances. In Deuteronomy 18:15-19 we are told a new prophet like Moses was to arise. Christians have long believed that this prophet is Jesus. So, throughout his Gospel, Matthew clearly points out what the church sees as connections between Moses and Jesus.

As today's passage opens, we see that Jesus' birth is set in a historical

time and place. In the first century, Bethlehem was a rural, Judean town estimated to have about 250 to 300 residents, including six or seven children under the age of one. Remember that about 1000 years prior, King David had been born and anointed in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16:1). This is what we might call a backwater town, but it was extremely significant then and remains so today.

The king the Wise Men visited was Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C., which is the year many believe that Jesus was born. A military leader, Herod had been appointed governor of Galilee. Although he is called “king” in verse 1, it’s important to note that he was not Jewish and had no ties to David’s lineage. He was cruel, paranoid, and ruthless, having killed one of his nine wives, two of his sons, and several other family members. We can easily see that Herod would be terrified when he heard from his visitors that “a child has been born king of the Jews” (2:2). Herod killed out of jealousy when he felt threatened, and his fear level was quickly increasing as he talked with his guests. And, when this king feels threatened, everyone in Jerusalem is scared too (2:3).

Herod was also shrewd. So when he heard about this newborn king, who may one day be in a position to usurp the throne, he called his Jewish scholars to answer the Wise Men’s question: Where is this child? They had followed his rising star, which they understand to signify the birth of a new ruler. The chief priests and scribes know the prophecy from Micah 5:2 (quoted in Matthew 2:6) that says a ruler will come forth from Bethlehem. That unnamed ruler, like David, is to be a shepherd to the people.

Herod invited the Wise Men in for a private audience and learned from them the exact time that the star appeared. We can surmise from his later order to kill all males in Bethlehem who were less than two years of age that this star likely appeared two years earlier. (Matthew 2:16-18). Many people have tried to pinpoint just what this natural phenomenon in the sky was, but to my knowledge there are lots of informed guesses but no definitive answers.

So far, we’re on pretty solid historical ground. But now we get to the Wise Men themselves and, thanks to legends that have been centuries in the making, we start to take off on flights of fancy. As you know from the popular hymn, they are referred to as three kings from the Orient. Likely, they did come from the east, specifically from Persia. They were not, however, political leaders but rather astrologers, which in their day referred to people who studied the stars. They would have been very highly respected, more like our astronomers. We certainly get a hint of their importance by the fact that Herod was willing to meet with them. And

seeing whatever it was that they saw in the sky, and believing that it was an important sign, they would have saddled up their camels and followed this star.

The Bible does tell us that they brought three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Over the years, these expensive gifts have gained symbolic significance. We can easily associate gold with kingship, so that one seems obvious. Frankincense and myrrh both come from fragrant tree resin. Myrrh has been used for medicinal purposes and also for embalming the dead, as alluded to in verse 4 of the carol, "We Three Kings." These hardly seem like appropriate gifts for a young child, but if we look ahead to the suffering in Jesus' life, we can easily make connections as to the reason for these gifts.

Now, here's where things really start to get tricky. Since there were three gifts, the assumption was made that there were three visitors. Not surprisingly, legend has given them three names and descriptions of their appearances. They are all Gentiles who represent different parts of the world. (<https://www.whychristmas.com/story/wisemen.shtml>):

- * Gaspar (or Caspar), who has brown hair and a brown beard (or no beard!) and wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels on it. He is the King of Sheba. Gaspar represents the Frankincense brought to Jesus.

- * Melchior, who has long white hair and a white beard and wears a gold cloak. He is the King of Arabia. Melchior represents the Gold brought to Jesus.

- * Balthazar, who has black skin and a black beard (or no beard!) and wears a purple cloak. He is the King of Tarsus/Macedonia and Egypt. Balthazar represents the gift of Myrrh that was brought to Jesus.

These Wise Men, also known as Magi, showed up unannounced at the "house" to visit the "child" (2:11). The Bible makes clear that they did not go to a stable, as our usual Nativity scenes depict. Jesus was a young boy, not a newborn. Just as they had told Herod they would do, the Magi "knelt down and paid him homage" (2:11). And then they opened their treasure chests to present their gifts (2:12).

We don't know how long they stayed, but we do know that in defiance of Herod's directions, they did not return to Jerusalem to tell him where this "king of the Jews" was. As we see in several places in Matthew's story, God-given dreams provided protection (1:20, 2:12, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22). The visitors had been "warned in a dream" not to return to Herod, so they went home by a different route (2:12). After they left, Joseph was warned in another dream to take his wife and young son and "flee to Egypt" to keep

Jesus away from the murderous plot of Herod (2:13).

So, what does all this mean? And what is the revelation to which “Epiphany” refers? What we’ve seen in the Bible story, and embellished by centuries-old legends, is that Jesus has been revealed not just to the Jews but also to the Gentiles, as represented by visitors who are said to have come from different corners of the world. We’ve learned that their gifts, which are hardly appropriate for a young child, point ahead to his future sufferings, as well as to his kingship. We’ve also learned that God leads us in many ways, including natural phenomena, dreams, and of course, Scripture. Interestingly, the scribes knew the Scriptures but didn’t put together that the Messiah had been born. And we’ve also discovered that if we obediently pay attention to whatever God is telling us, however we may receive that message, then we will be living according to God’s will.

The Magi did this. And when they finally reached the place where the star stopped, “they were overwhelmed with joy” (2:10). I wonder how often we can claim to be overwhelmed with joy. Stephen Farris reminds us:

Joy is a primary human response to the presence and activity of God in the world... It comes from the presence of the Holy Spirit...Joy inevitably finds expression. Joy leads to rejoicing.

Professor Farris also points out that the Greek word (*chara*) usually translated as “joy” is also related to “grace,” and “to give thanks.” The apostle Paul calls us to, “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

Let’s think about how we can do that. Certainly, we rejoice by singing and saying words of praise. But there is much more. We can show our joy by presenting what we value to God. As new members join The United Methodist Church, they promise to “faithfully participate in the life and ministries of our local congregation through [their] prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.” These vows apply to all of us. As we open our hearts, offer our prayers, present our gifts, perform service, and witness to others about how God has acted in our lives, we do so with joy. Fulfilling these vows is not done with a sense of obligation and drudgery, but rather with a sense, as the Magi had experienced, of overwhelming joy as we stand in the presence of God.

In these weeks after Epiphany, until we reach the beginning of Lent, we’ll be exploring other ways in which the identity of Jesus is revealed to us and the responses that people make to him. As we explore each Scripture lesson during the next several weeks, let’s think about how we might have responded had we been present. For example, what would you have said or done while standing on the shore of the Jordan as Jesus was baptized? What would you, if you were a servant at the wedding in Cana who knew

that Jesus had turned water into wine, think about him? As you listened to Jesus' first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth where you had watched him grow up, what would you want to ask him? Who would you think Jesus was when you made an amazing catch of fish after coming up with an empty net all night? What would be your response if you had seen Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop?

Some of you are probably thinking, right, Nan. I haven't seen any of this, so I have no idea how I'd respond. Fair enough. But what experiences have you had that reveal Jesus to you and perhaps fill you with joy in the process? Have you or a loved one ever recovered from a serious illness and known beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jesus was with you the entire time? Have you held a newborn and given thanks for this life of promise and the journey you may have with this child? Have you planted a crop, prayed for sun and rain, and then harvested the bounty that grew? Have you seen hope in the eyes of someone who had felt hopeless and now, after meeting Christ, can find joy in life, even if external circumstances have not changed? You get the idea. Just look around, and think back on your own life. I have to believe that all of you have, in your own way, been overwhelmed by joy as you've discovered or rediscovered Jesus' presence in your life.

Great joy is also found in giving to Jesus by giving to people in need. These needs may be material, physical, emotional, and/or spiritual. When we give to others in need, blessings come back to us many times over. No, we don't give to get something in return or to curry God's favor. Rather, we give as a response to God's gracious activity in our lives. That giving, whatever the gift may be, brings joy to the receiver, joy to the giver, and joy to God. The gifts the Magi brought to the Christ Child were costly, but many gifts that have great meaning to others cost little or nothing. A note of encouragement, a warm hug, strong support during a difficult time—all are free and yet are just as valuable and bring as much joy as the Magi's gifts. What gifts will you bring fit to honor King Jesus and the people he loves?

Love, Nan