

What We Learn from the Magi - Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ⁱ

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Thursday this past week was Epiphany. Epiphany is generally defined for the church as the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi.

It can also be defined as a moment in which you suddenly see or understand something in a new or very clear way.

Both understandings of the word Epiphany are helpful as we consider the events of Matthew chapter 2.

Before we get to the details of the story, you may wonder, just who are these Magi that are referenced in our passage.

Tradition and general depictions of Matthew 2 tell us that these were “wise men” or “kings” from the east. If you asked most people, they might tell you that there were three of these “wise men.”

The term Magi [used in Matthew] is a plural form of *magoi* in Greek language, which means Zoroastrian priests. [Zoroastrianism is an ancient and still practiced

religion found most notably at the time of the New Testament in Persia (modern Iran). This group] were neither kings nor wise men. Maybe they earned the title wise men because of their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology. They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. [The Magi also included both men and women.]ⁱⁱ

With this background on the Magi – what are some things we can deduce about them and this series of events? What can we learn from the Magi?

First, they were gentiles. The Magi were not even gentile followers of Judaism. They were followers of a what we would term a pagan religion.

Secondly, these Magi studied the stars. It was believed that important events could be announced by the stars. The Magi understood from their study of the stars that a new ruler had been born in Palestine.

Historical evidence tells us that it was common practice for dignitaries of foreign countries to go to other countries when a new ruler was born – to pay their respects and to keep up good relations. It is a good guess that was part of the reason for the Magi coming to find Jesus.

The Magi went to Jerusalem first looking for the child. It would have made perfect sense for them to go where the current “king” (Herod) was, in order to look for the new King. Herod, however, did not know about any new King. So, Herod asked for the Sanhedrin to gather and to tell him what Scripture had to say.

The Sanhedrin told Herod that Micah 5:2-5 predicts that a King is to be born in Bethlehem.

When Herod learns of this, he calls the Magi back, asks when the Star first appeared and sends them to Bethlehem to search for the child – with the instruction to return and tell him what they find so that he “can go worship the new king, too.”

What the Magi seem to not know, is just how awful a person Herod was and that his intent towards the new King was not a benevolent one.

Herod the Great was well-known in the ancient world for both his paranoia and his brutality. He had one of his wives and several of his sons murdered because he thought they were plotting against him. Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor under whom Herod ruled, is rumored to have said that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. As the would-be Jewish king, Herod could not eat pork, so his pigs were safer than his progeny!ⁱⁱⁱ

Based on Herod's later order of the killing of male children 2 years and under in the area of Bethlehem, we deduce that Jesus was probably 2 years old at the time of the Magi's visit.

The Magi then leave Herod and head to Bethlehem. There 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" (Matthew 2:11).

The gifts from the Magi could have their own special meanings outside of gifts befitting a King of another country. Gold would have been a normal gift for a King. Frankincense and Myrrh might have been less common.

According to Elisabeth Johnson, a Professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Cameroon,

Both frankincense and myrrh come from the fragrant resins of trees, and both have long been used in perfumes and in the making of incense for worship....

In the ancient world, myrrh was also a common agent used for embalming the dead, and according to John's Gospel, it was used at Jesus' burial (John 19:39).^{iv}

So, these particular gifts can be seen as foreshadowing what is to come for this new King.

Verse 12 tells us that the Magi were warned about Herod in a dream and returned to their own country by another road.

Despite all of this information ***about*** the Magi, we are still left with the question we started with: what can we learn from the Magi?

The fact that the Magi were Gentiles is significant. A Pastor, Niveen Sarras, points out that,

Matthew starts his gospel by showing a contrast between the Gentiles and Jewish secular and religious leaders. The Magi “knelt down and paid him homage.” (verse 11), but King Herod the Great wanted to kill him. Matthew wants to show throughout his gospel that Jewish leaders rejected Jesus and oppressed him, but the Gentiles accepted him.^v

God’s Kingdom has a bigger reach than we may know. Certainly, it had a bigger reach than the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day knew.

It would do us well to not make assumptions about who is or is not part of God’s Kingdom. That is God’s domain. Ours is more simply to follow the example of the Magi and to kneel down and pay Jesus homage.

The Magi were the “learned” people of their country. While we may dismiss people who “study” astrology in a manner similar to the Magi, their study of the stars led them to believe that a new King had been born. Their belief was so strong that they packed up to go find this King.

Anyone, whether by chance or serious pursuit, can come to know about and come into a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Today's story from Matthew also, and most importantly, tells us that Jesus is King. Not Herod, not some other foreign dignitary or even our own political leaders. Jesus is King.

Not living in a country with a monarchy we might think this a foreign concept. However, we all get the idea of the allegiance most people in the UK give to Queen Elizabeth II. We all can definitely see the allegiance that people in our own country give to our political leaders – regardless of party.

So the idea of allegiance to a King really is not **that** hard to understand.

Look at the Magi. They made a long journey from Persia to Bethlehem, encountering a would-be king with hostile intentions before they found the Christ Child and knelt before him. They risked their lives to come to worship the new King. Would we? Would I? Would you?

God welcomes those outside of the “in group.” For the Magi, God welcomed Gentiles, for today, who knows whom it is that God welcomes outside of the “in group” of church-goers?

Jesus is our King. The Magi came and worshipped him. We should do no less.

Everyone who happens to worship on Epiphany [or the Sunday after] has their own... story to tell concerning their pathway to the [Christ Child]. Some may have no idea who [this Child] is. Others have mistaken ideas about [him]. Nevertheless, all are present due to the prompting of God, who initiates our asking, our seeking, and our finding.... The magi's journey to Bethlehem exposes God's intention to welcome everyone "into the joy of [God's] home not made with hands eternal in the heavens," and, remarkably, on earth as well.^{vi}

Please pray with me.

Beloved Jesus,
may [we] have the faith and insight of the [Magi],
who, when faced with an ancient hope of a foreign people
and the appearance of a remarkable star,
grasped the connection, and went and followed that star.
[We] stand now at the border of a new year,
which is to [us] like an unknown country.

[We] don't know what [we] will experience as [we] traverse
it; [We] don't know what obstacles will lie across [our] path.
Lead [us], like the [Magi], on a quest
of faithfulness and worship,
of hopefulness and giving,
and always unto Yourself. Amen.^{vii}

ⁱ Scripture passages are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-8>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-11>.

^{iv} <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-11>.

^v <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/epiphany-of-our-lord/commentary-on-matthew-21-12-8>.

^{vi} Feasting on the Word, p. 216.

^{vii} Written by Jeanie Gushee (1962–), in Yours Is the Day, Lord, Yours Is the Night: A Morning and Evening Prayer Book. Posted on Prayers & Creeds. Found at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2018/01/prayer-for-epiphany.html>.