

Epiphany 2015 (transferred)
Matthew 2:1-12
January 4th, 2015
The Rev. John Forman

Epiphany is, certainly, a feast of Christmas. There are those who refer to this Epiphany reading as the “adult Christmas story.” That’s because if anyone made this story and its darker context into a film, the content would likely warrant an R rating. In the opening scene, Herod, an agent of the forces of earthly empire, sends a team to seek out a threat to the empire that he must contain. What follow are secrets, lies, infanticide, abuse of power and betrayal. These elements make today’s reading more complex, more dramatic and harder to resolve. And yet, being a Christmas story, this reading is ultimately joyful.

Like the gentler, quieter Christmas story we heard 10 days ago, Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that the eternal light of the Christ-child, even in the manger, is still more powerful than all darkness. Out of love, the God of all creation came to us as a baby. Like Luke’s story, Matthew’s story tells of people who came to the baby, inspired by the God who loved them first. We sang the hymn that John Henry Hopkins, Jr. wrote in 1857, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” that connects our Gospel to our Old Testament reading from Isaiah that said: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The hymn also connects our Gospel to the psalm appointed for this morning, Psalm 72 that says: “All kings shall bow down before him and all nations do him service.”

The hymn makes those connections, the Gospel does not. Matthew never calls them kings. Never names them. Never mentions how many there were—only that they brought three gifts. Tradition crowned, named and numbered them long after Matthew’s Gospel was written. Sometime around the year 500 C.E., parts of Christianity began representing Balthasar as a king of Arabia, Caspar as a king of India, and Melchior as a king of Persia. But there are at least three sets of other names and a wide variety of stories about them. Some say they were Jews, others say Gentiles. Some say they were Zoroastrian priests, still others say that they were Babylonians. Chinese Christians claim at least one of them. The cameo nature of the magi’s appearance has not helped resolve the considerable confusion about who they might have been. Recent historical

and cultural studies do tend to agree that whoever these people were, it is deeply improbable that they were kings.

The point that Matthew's audience would have found improbable, even shocking, is not an enhancement from tradition. The more challenging point for them, found right there in the scripture, is this: The magi use astrology to find the Christ-child. In our opening scene with Herod, the magi have the first speaking lines: "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." To hear it in today's language, imagine them saying something like, "We noticed an alignment of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces, which indicated to us that a new king of the Jews would be born in Judea." I don't imagine I would have taken them seriously. Would you?

Given how strongly Hebrew scripture condemned astral cults, Matthew's listeners may have been a little scandalized by this story of a star leading astrologists to Jesus. Matthew must have trusted strongly that God could work through vastly different faith traditions, because there they are, in Matthew's Gospel alone, a group of questionable pagans—not Luke's shepherds following an angel's good news— but people well outside the acceptable norms, trusting and searching, until they become the first people other than family to encounter the Christ child.

That single challenging plot-point opens the experience of the Epiphany so that it blossoms for us as the feast day of the blessed adventure of every seeker of God, the great excursion of all who respond to God's first tug at their heart. The feast of Epiphany becomes a celebration of the life-journeys of every person who has found God because God found them first. God, the goal of every spiritual quest—the ocean to which all the rivers of yearning run. Every yearning for salvation, for healing, for justice or mercy. Every yearning for wisdom, for love, for forgiveness. These are yearnings planted in the heart by God who leads all kinds and types of people from a multitude of perspectives, languages and traditions.

And when God is found at the end of each of those paths, there is a common response. The overwhelming awe in the realization of the gift that has been given, the sheer magnitude of God's love, always and already present, causes each of us in our

own way to do just what the magi did. When we finally do encounter Christ after whatever trials, missteps or dangers we have been through, our most appropriate and eloquent response is simply to drop to our knees. Just as the magi did when they came upon the Christ-child, overwhelmed with joy, we drop to our knees.

When the magi came and knelt down, Karl Rahner writes, “they only did what they had in reality always been doing, what they were already doing during their search and journey: they brought before the invisible face of God now made visible the gold of their love, the incense of their reverence and the myrrh of their suffering.”¹

In the ancient Mediterranean world, gold was a gift given in recognition of an earthly monarch. Frankincense, a resin that we still use for incense, was a gift given to a deity. These two gifts appeared at the end of our reading from Isaiah this morning, and while the prophet is not referring to Jesus, Isaiah’s poetry still speaks to us.

The passage we heard this morning was written by a prophet or prophets who lived in Jerusalem after the Jewish people began returning from Babylonian exile in 539 B.C.E. They were returning to disheartening decay in infrastructure and political leadership. They came back to find the great temple left in ruins by the Babylonians. In the midst of grief and despair comes Isaiah’s poetic and practical prayer of hope. Isaiah’s promise of gold is a reference to the financial resources necessary for rebuilding the temple. The prophet also promised frankincense, which was required for worship. Because the resin comes from trees found only on the Arabian Peninsula and northeast Africa, Isaiah promised that in God’s restoration of Jerusalem to prosperity, a multitude of camels would bring the precious incense so pleasing to God in worship. The prophet is refocusing the people’s hearts and minds—*and ours*—reminding us to lift our hopes and trust God whose glory will one day shine again on the children of Israel as a beacon for the whole world.

So the magi’s first two gifts were appropriate to give the Christ-child in that Jewish context—both practical and symbolic. So was the third. Myrrh is also derived from a tree resin from Arabia and northeast Africa, and was used in religious and

¹ Rahner, Karl, and Albert Raffelt. *The Great Church Year: The Best of Karl Rahner's Homilies, Sermons, and Meditations*. New York: Crossroad, 1993.

specifically burial ceremonies throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. The first two gifts acknowledged the connection of heaven and earth; the myrrh acknowledged the connection of death to new life. The magi left their three gifts and then disappeared as quietly as they came. They went home by another road, never actually participating in Herod's plot (they were *wise* people, after all!). And they go home different themselves, having encountered the Christ.

Maybe that is why we like to think of them as kings. Maybe we recognize the dignity and the purity of their hearts and actions. Maybe we recognize the majesty of anyone who has poured out their whole heart for a star that has caught their souls. Who has come from some distant place and been granted a new heart—a royal heart—and an adventurous new path home. Maybe that is what is so compelling about the story of the magi that makes us want to call them kings—even to name them, give them homes and backgrounds. Their story is like so many of ours—stories of maturing through challenges.

And the star still shines. We have started a new year and the star still shines. The star shines in all our skies, through all our darkneses. The paths set before us take us through lush jungles or parched deserts, frantic cities or untouched wildernesses. The star shines to stir all hearts to action. If you consent to follow, the star may seem far away. Persevere. Your path may be a long one, but you are never alone. The star may seem close at hand. Persevere. There are those who will need your guidance.

If you consent to follow, you can't take much with you. You have gifts to bring: the gold of your love, the frankincense of your yearning and prayer, and the myrrh of your suffering as a reminder. God has already found you and, if you consent to follow, God will lead you closer and closer. Together, we will find Christ. Together, we will kneel and leave everything there. And then we will go home by another road.