

Magi and Missions
Home Church, 1/5/2025
Communion Meditation
Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

Tomorrow is Epiphany in the church's calendar, and it will be time to take down our stars. Epiphany is an interesting word. It's a Greek word meaning that something has been revealed. In Greek mythology, epiphany described the moment when one of the gods revealed themselves to humans. Today we use the word epiphany to describe moments of sudden insight. Something that was obscure to us becomes clear. One of the things I love most about teaching is that every so often you see a student get an epiphany when they understand something difficult or have a life-changing insight. Suddenly their face lights up with joy. Whether large or small, such epiphanies change us and change the world. They bring light and clarity of purpose.

In the church year, epiphany refers to the day when the magi found the Christ child in Bethlehem. On Christmas Eve we read the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospel of Luke, but today we get a very different account from the gospel of Matthew. Most nativity scenes, such as the one we use at Candle Tea, depict the wisemen in the cattle shed alongside the shepherds and angels, but that tableau is not in the Bible. Matthew doesn't say anything about shepherds or Mary and Joseph traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem. He just says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that magi came from the East bearing gifts. He tells implies that the Magi found Jesus several weeks or even months after his birth because the star appeared when he was born. We tend to compress the story we tell children in church, but in doing so, we miss some key insights. First let's take a look at the Magi. Who were they?

Legends

Like me, you probably grew up singing the carol We Three Kings from Orient Are. As a kid I always wondered where Orient-R was and if it was near Orient S and T.

In many Catholic countries, Epiphany is called Three Kings Sunday because medieval interpreters misunderstand the meaning of Magi and assumed that they were kings. Several years ago, I was asked to preach in a church in Honduras, and it happened to be Epiphany. I wrote a message about the Wise Men coming to Jesus and that we need to be wise people today, but my interpreter was confused. In Latin America the men who brought gifts to Jesus are never called Wise Men; they are always the Three Kings. So, she decided to preach a different sermon in Mosquito after I preached mine in English.

The elevation of the Magi to royal status probably came from preachers using the Psalms and Isaiah interpret the Matthew text. Psalm 72 says that the kings of Sheba and Saba will pay homage to the messiah and bring him gold. By the Middle Ages, it was generally accepted that the Magi were kings and priests, but that obscures the meaning of Matthew's story. The Magi were not rulers; they were scholars.

From the East

There are various legends about where the Magi came from. Christians in China and India insist that the Magi came from their countries. Ethiopian Christians insisted that one of the Magi, named Balthasar, was from Ethiopia. Many scholars suggested that the Magi came Babylon (modern Iraq), which had a large Jewish population in the time of Jesus. Babylon was famous for its astrologers, and modern star gazers still use some of the Babylonian names for stars. Other ancient interpreters speculated that Arabia was the home of the Magi since Arabians were famous for trading gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. You may have wondered why there are camels in many living nativity scenes when none are mentioned in the gospel. It is because of this idea that they came from Arabia.

Astrologers

There are many more legends about the Magi recorded in ancient texts, including various names for each of them, but modern biblical scholars are pretty sure that the travelers described by Matthew came from the mighty Persian Empire. The word Matthew uses is *magoi*, which is a Greek word that usually means magicians. According to ancient Greek historians, the Magoi were a priestly caste who served the Persian emperors as advisors and seers. They interpreted dreams and studied the stars to try to predict the future. With the rise of Zoroastrianism in Persia, the magoi became Zoroastrian priests. So it is possible that the Magi were Zoroastrian priests and astronomers.

Why is all of this important? Because Matthew is telling us that God revealed the most important event in history to Gentiles or pagans, using their science and religion. The sages from the East did not have the Bible to guide them; they had their own traditions, which included studying the heavens. In short, these Gentiles perceived something that even the Jewish scribes serving King Herod had not seen. At the beginning of Matthew's gospel he tell us that there was a divine revelation, an epiphany, among the Gentiles. Matthew ends his gospel with the Great Commission to go and teach the nations. We can say that for Matthew the great Epiphany is that God comes to all people, all cultures.

Moravians

In the time of Zinzendorf, few Westerners had ever visited Persia, Arabia, or Ethiopia. Europeans had a few stories and tales about the

mysterious Orient. Zinzendorf believed that the whole world should be united in devotion to Christ, starting with the reuniting of all the various Christian churches. He sent ambassadors and missionaries to the patriarchs of the Greek, Russia, and Egyptian Orthodox Churches. A few brave Moravian missionaries even tried to reach Persia and Ethiopian in the hope they could find the descendants of the Magi who were rumored to still be Christian.

Despite repeated attempts, none of the Moravians made it to those distant lands. But their effort speaks to the power of this story to inspire heroic missionary journeys. This is the reason that in the Moravian Church Epiphany is a time that we focus on world mission. We'll hear more about missions in Sunday school this morning. As we struggle to make sense of world events and politics in our day, we should remember that Persian (Iranian) sages came to Bethlehem to adore the Christ child. Our Moravian star that shines until Epiphany calls us to be like the Magi and pay homage to Christ, but it also calls us to leave the safety of our home and go into the world as agents of Christ's love. The star invites us to cross border and barriers to embraces other in God's love.

Herod

But that's not the only thing revealed in Matthew's story. It's not surprising that the Magi first went to the king of the Jews, the great and powerful Herod, to discuss the star with him. The Magi probably assumed that the elderly king would be happy to hear news that there was an heir to his throne, but Herod was not happy about the news that the Messiah had appeared. He lived in daily fear that some Jewish revolutionary, some messiah, would arise and seize his throne. We knew there were several

Jewish rebellions during Herod's reign, which he crushed ruthlessly. He even murdered his own sons for fear they would usurp him.

For King Herod, the Christmas message that we celebrate year after year was not good news of great joy. The star the Magi followed was not a symbol of hope for Herod. The baby born in Bethlehem represented the end of his hopes, dreams, and way of life.

We may be shocked that a king could feel threatened by a star, a prophecy, and a baby, but tyrants today are still frightened by anything they perceive as a threat to their rule, especially anything that brings hope to people who are oppressed. The child born in Bethlehem a threat to the powerful then, and he remains a threat today. This is another epiphany or insight that we need to remember.

Moravians continue to promote the vision of Matthew and Count Zinzendorf vision that one day all nations will adore the Savior and live according to his teachings. But we sometimes forget that this message can be threatening. The star of Bethlehem shakes the foundations of the powerful. Those who benefit from oppression do not want the system to change. Many of the early Moravian missionaries were arrested, abused, and even beaten for bringing the gospel to enslaved and oppressed people.

Conclusion

The danger of Epiphany is that the love of Christ might melt our cynical hearts and call us to live in this world as Christ lived. Christ's love crosses deserts, seas, and barriers of all kind. What if the message of joy, love, hope, and peace that shines so brightly this time of year really inspired all of us to give up our greed, selfishness, arrogance, and privilege? What would happen if hundreds of millions of people followed the prince of peace and lived according to his example of sacrificial love and forgiveness?

In a few moments we will share in Holy Communion, which is the most sacred ritual in Christianity. Everyone is invited to the table of the Lord. The true miracle of Holy Communion is that we are transformed by sharing in the body and blood of Christ. We come to this table because Christ first came to us. Amen.