



We keep seeking

Matthew 2:1-23

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Good morning, and let us rejoice. For today we celebrate the Epiphany!

Epiphany is one of those churchy words we use that describes the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a celebration that was added in to the church's schedule of feasts around 360 AD. It was, at first, tied in to the celebration of Jesus' baptism, but by the end of the 4th Century, the Epiphany has been separated and given its own day of celebration.

Epiphany is officially set for January 6, regardless if that's a Sunday or not. It comes at the end of the 12 days of Christmas. But it's worth noting, the 12 days of Christmas was not a thing when the celebration of Epiphany began. The 12 Days of Christmas was not formally added into the church's calendar as a sacred season until the mid-6th Century, nearly 200 years after the Epiphany was first celebrated.

So you may ask, why January 6? If the 12-days was not a thing yet, how did the church land on this date? I think that's a good question, and, like much of ancient church history, it isn't easily answered. There are as many answers as there are scholarly articles on why we celebrate the Epiphany on January 6. One of the explanations, the one I find most amusing, stems from the reading of the gospel. In his book on the Christian Calendar, Philip Carrington says that a group of early Christians, known as the Basilides, would divide the gospel up into daily readings. Using the gospel of Mark, if they started at the beginning of the gospel on January 1, they would reach the story of Jesus' baptism on January 6. Thus, January 6 became the day to celebrating Jesus' baptism, which again, used to be connected to the celebration of Epiphany.

Regardless how we got to January 6, the Epiphany today continues to be a celebration for the church that proclaims the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. As the church celebrates this festive day in modern time, the celebration is most often connected with the Biblical text found in Matthew 2, highlighting the arrival of the Magi.

Like much of the Christmas story, the narrative of the Magi has received its fair share of commercial embellishments over the past 2000 years. Their story has been retold and reimagined in so many different ways, it can be hard to separate what the Biblical narrative actually says about the magi from what our decorative nativity scenes depict. Perhaps you are familiar with some of these cultural depictions.

For example, when I was in college, I was a part of the drama department, which put on the opera, "Amahl and the Night Visitors." In this production, first produced in the 1950s, the magi are represented by three kings: Melchior from Persia, Caspar from India, and Balthasar from Arabia. The

opera aired on NBC nationwide, and had an estimated 5 million viewers – in 1951. I’m not sure I would have guessed 5 million people had TVs in 1951 (for the record, I looked it up, there were about 12 million households with TVs in the early 50s. So nearly half of those who had a black and white TV watched the production!)

But regardless of Amahl’s popularity, it was not the first to portray the magi as such wealthy royalty. The song we will sing following this morning’s sermon, “We Three Kings,” was first penned 100 years earlier in the 1850s offering life and voice to Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

It’s also interesting that in our decorative nativity scenes, the magi – portrayed as these three kings – are present in the stable with the newborn infant, Jesus. There’s this constant visual display during the holiday season that adorns our bookshelves and countertops that convinces us the magi were present in the days following Mary’s delivery as if the magi walked in on the heels of the shepherds to offer these extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These depictions – from the crown wearing kings to the triad of camels present at the stable – are all well and good. And perhaps they don’t do any real harm to the story. But, as we have already heard the reading of the Gospel this morning, these details aren’t in the story. When we look more closely, I think there’s a greater significance to the magi and their role in the gospel than offering the presence of some embellished cradle-side royal gift-givers.

Matthew’s gospel is the only narrative that mentions the magi, so we will give him all of our attention to learn about the Epiphany – the revelation of God in the person of Christ, highlighted by these unexpected visitors from the East.

The scripture begins, “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the one who has been born the king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have to come and pay him homage.’”

As Matthew begins, there are a number of important details being offered. First, let’s debunk the idea that there are *three ... kings*. Nowhere in Matthew’s text does it ever offer the number of individuals who were present in this group of travelers from the East. Matthew simply says, and the text will repeat this word a number of times, that these are “magi.” The Greek word in the original text is *magoi*, the plural form of *magos*. So, while Matthew indicates there are more than one, it’s never named that there are three. That has become the assumed number because of the number of gifts. In fact, if we look closely, it never even says that they are all men, another common portrayal of the magi. Though the word *magoi* is masculine in speech, the Greek is like modern Spanish. If there’s even one man in a group of 1000 women, you use the masculine form of the word to describe the group.

There are many different scholarly opinions on who these magi would have been and what the word *magos* would have meant 2000 years ago. It is not commonly accepted that they were kings or even royalty, though the gifting of valuable gifts does hint that they were wealthy. One of the more common beliefs is that, since they were following a star, they could have come from a group of astrologers from an upper caste of an Eastern region, known as Zoroastrian. But again, even this assumption would be to

ascribe more than the text offers. *Magi* is what Matthew tells us. *Magi* – the plural form of a word used to describe magicians, sorcerers, seers, astrologers, wise men, and other people who found revelation in extraordinary things. That should be all we need to know about them: they find revelation in extraordinary things.

They came to Jerusalem and sought guidance from the current king of the region, King Herod. King Herod was little more than a puppet king, but he was the regional man-in-power on behalf of the Roman Empire. That the magi went to King Herod highlights a significant reality. They believed the star would lead them to the newborn King of Jews, and they expected Herod to have information on the child. They assumed that royalty beget royalty. These magi come to the city of power in the region, because that's where they would have expected a new king to have been born.

Herod, hearing this inquiry about a new King of the Jews, started freaking out. His job, his assignment from Caesar, was to maintain power and order on behalf of Rome in the region of Judea. Should there be a new king for the regional inhabitants – the Jews – well, that could mean big trouble for Herod. But Herod is a man of power, and as such, he knew how to use his power to maintain his power. We've seen that kind of power on display this past week across the river – people in power do everything they can with their power to maintain their power.

But, like the magi, Herod is not a Jew. He doesn't know the prophecies about a coming King of the Jews. So, Herod calls together his own team of wise men – the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem – to inquire about the birth of a Messiah. These educated Jewish leaders offer from the prophet Micah, who had hundreds of years earlier declared that the Messiah, the one to rule Israel, would come from Bethlehem.

Herod then calls the magi back to him, this time in secret.

Shady things happen behind closed doors in halls of power.

In the cloak of secrecy, Herod asks the magi when exactly they had seen the star arise. How long ago did this sign first appear? He then tells them that his own scholars have indicated the child was to be born in Bethlehem. So, he tells them to go and find the child, and to come back after visiting the new king to make sure he, Herod, knows where this child is living because he too wants to pay homage to this new king.

Bethlehem is a small, seemingly insignificant, neighboring town in the shadow of Jerusalem. It wouldn't have taken the magi more than a day or two to get to Bethlehem, even if they were riding on camels – a piece of information, again, not found in Matthew. The magi continued following the guidance of the star, which led them directly to the place in Bethlehem where the child was living.

Then, in verse 11, Matthew writes, "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." According to Matthew, Mary wasn't in a stable or a sheltered barn. Mary was with Jesus in a house.

Now, this could just be Matthew, but if you read through chapter 1, you'll see that Matthew never says anything about Mary and Joseph having travelled to Bethlehem for a census. It's almost as if, for Matthew, Mary and Joseph were residents of this town just outside of Jerusalem. That the magi visited the family in Bethlehem is not an indication that they're visiting at Jesus' birth ... it's that they're visiting Jesus in his house.

Having made their visit, having gifted three expensive items fit for a king, the magi returned back to their own country. *But they didn't go back through Jerusalem*, for they had a dream that warned them not to go back to Herod.

These traveling magi, people from a different region, likely of a different faith or no faith, Gentiles by non-Jewish association, paid homage and gave gifts to Jesus as the King of the Jews, and then, having had a dream – an indicator that they had encountered the holiness of God – they protected Jesus from the political powers of the time by choosing to disobey the orders of Herod, choosing faithfulness over politics.

Long before his baptism, Jesus was already bringing together people of other religions and cultures to acknowledge a divine presence – the presence of the holy in the person of Christ.

Just as the magi had a dream, so too did Joseph. Joseph was warned that Herod would try to destroy the child, and that he should take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt. There are a lot of people who want to deny the reality that Jesus was, at least in this moment, a refugee seeking safety in another region. But Matthew is pretty clear in the narrative: Joseph took his family out of Judea into another societal region for protection from the threat of harm from an empirical authority. The holy family was, at least for a time, refugees in a foreign land, having left Judea in hopes of personal safety.

And they did so good reason, for, just as the Lord has said to Joseph in the dream, Herod did try to kill Jesus. Herod was pretty angry that the magi did not come back to offer the whereabouts of this new King of the Jews. And so, in a fit of rage, since he couldn't go after Jesus individually, Herod sent a kill-team of Roman soldiers to kill every child under the age of two in and around Bethlehem. Matthew tells us that Herod chose the age of two because of the timing of the star as told to him by the magi. The text, at minimum, hints that Jesus could have been as old as two ... though Herod isn't taking any chances on the timing being wrong, and kills every child, two and under.

Joseph and family lived in Egypt for a number of years. In fact, Matthew indicates they lived there until Herod died. After his death, Joseph received another dream saying, "Take the child and his mother back to Israel." En route, Joseph learned that Herod's son was the new king in charge of Judea, and, fearful the son would carry out his father's dirty work, the holy family moved north into the region of Galilee, into the town of Nazareth.

For Matthew, Jesus is the promised Messiah as foretold by the Jewish prophets. And even his relocation to Nazareth is offered as a fulfillment of the prophecies, which declared that the Messiah would be called a Nazorean. In Luke's gospel, Mary and Joseph are from Nazareth. In Matthew's text, they relocate to Nazareth upon their return from Egypt.

When we get beyond the fluff and alterations to the identity of the magi as found in commercial storytelling, what we find is a pretty significant declaration of the presence and power of God in Christ. For starters, in Matthew's Gospel, the Magi are the first to visit Jesus (Matthew doesn't include the story of the shepherds). The first to visit and the first to acknowledge Jesus as the King of the Jews are gentiles from outside of the region and outside the covenant people of Israel.

The magi are offered in stark contrast to King Herod. As Pastor and Professor Anna Case-Winters notes, "[The magi] come in an attitude of seeking. They are prepared to do homage, bringing gifts fit for a king. ... On the other hand, there is King Herod ... What he seeks is to secure his power and his place. He is frightened and scheming, killing innocent babes in his rage."ⁱ Scholar Stanley Hauerwas adds, "Herod's fear of this baby reveals the depth of his fragility. Herods know that their positions require constant vigilance, because any change may well make their insecure positions more insecure."

The posture of the magi is one of humbleness, intrigue, and faithfulness. The posture of Herod is one of spite, fear, and injustice.

The magi are also a witness to the truth of God's presence in the world, which beckons even those from outside the covenant people to take part in witnessing God's glory in Christ. The Epiphany is an invitation to all people, everywhere, to see the revelation of good news in the person of Jesus.

Finally, the magi make a strong declaration in refusing to return to Herod. Their witness declares that we cannot claim Jesus as King and still heed allegiance to earthly kings. The Gospel is full of politics and political messaging, including here at the Epiphany. In the revelation of who Christ is as God incarnate, in the visit of the magi, we find a stark reality that proclaims we can only serve one king, and that the power of this king, Christ the Messiah, will stand in opposition to those who sit on thrones of empirical leadership. In truth, even as an toddler, the person of God in Christ was a threat to the empire. And the story suggests we are more likely to find the presence of God in the refugees fleeing for safety than in the leaders whose actions forced them to flee.

Even if we enjoy the identity embellishments that song and story offer to the magi, let us not forget the proclamation of God's glory in Jesus Christ their story reveals, nor their witness to faithfulness in the political mess of empires. May we set our eyes on the star that leads to Christ, that we too may travel with humility and grace to see the good news and to find the glory of God in the presence of the Jesus, the Messiah, the King of the Jews. Amen and Amen.

ⁱ Anna Case-Winters. *Matthew: Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.