

**Feast of the Epiphany**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**3 January 2021**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

The passage of our Pageant today is so famous that some of us tune out when we hear the words read. This is why this is a great passage to be narrated, like the kids did today. The expression “familiarity breathes contempt” applies well to this passage. Now, I don't blame us for thinking that we know the story of the Magi better than we actually know it. After all, when you look at most Christmas Postcards we see three well-to-do kings, dressed in fancy clothes, loaded with expensive gifts, and traveling a great distance to come and meet baby Jesus. We see them engaged in international politics as they discuss their journey with King Herod, and we see them listening intently to the scribes and high priests summoned by the king to tell them “where the Messiah was to be born.” Finally, we see them leaving Herod's palace with a royal command to march to Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, to find the child. They have become Herod's emissaries!

So far, this sounds like a very nice story, and perhaps the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies that people from the nations of the world would come to Israel's Messiah. What we have here, however, is a radical story of contrasts, a revolutionary story of grace, and a wide invitation to all of us to become a part of the story this text gives us today. Before we get into the text itself, let us speak about the context. First, let us talk about the magi themselves. The first thing that I notice is that Matthew does not tell us how many of them were there. It doesn't say that there were three of them, four of them, even five of them. It simply says, “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” The idea that there were three of them is the result of extra-biblical legends. People just assumed that because there were three gifts given to the child, there must have been three kings, but in fact we don't know how many were there.

The next little detail to notice is that Matthew does not give these men any names. This is interesting because I learned as a child that these three people were called Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar (who is portrayed as a black man.) Sadly, we don't know their names or the color of their skin. And their supposed names are also extra-biblical material created many years after the Gospel. Another area of clarification required is the words used by various translations as “Kings,” “Wise Men,” and “Astronomers.” The Greek Word is “Magoi,” which is translated Magi. The question that I have is simple, “Were these magi wealthy, foreign dignitaries and kings?” “Where they the wise men, professor-type intellectuals of the day?” I am afraid that this also is more myth than truth.

Pastor Brian Stoffregen describes these people the following way: “Originally, in Persia, Magi were dream-interpreters. By Jesus' time, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers. In fact, our word ‘magic’ or ‘magician’ comes from this word ‘magi’. They were not so much respectable ‘wise men’ or ‘kings’ but horoscope fanatics -- a practice condemned by Jewish standards. We might compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, or people on the ‘psychic hotline’ or other ‘occupations’ that foretell the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards, etc.” (<http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt2x1.htm>).

In fact, to the people of Matthew's day magi would represent the epitome of Gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus. So, the question for me is, “Why does Matthew make these people the heroes of his story?” I believe the magi in this context fall in the same

category as the shepherds that came right before them in the story. Shepherds were considered people of shady character, who were not allowed to give testimony in a court of law. They were filthy, smelly men who slept in the fields with their sheep, had little to no access to hygiene, and were considered unrighteous in the eyes of the Pharisees. They were men who were considered on the fringes of society. The magi, likewise, are considered charlatan gentiles, on the fringes of society. And yet, it is to these people that God chooses to reveal his Son, the Savior of the world. What we have here is a clash of two kingdoms and two different responses to the Messiah, by people who stand on two very different socio-economic and socio-political places in life.

In fact, if George Lucas was filming this story, he might subdivide the plot into two different scenes. He might call the first scene: *The Empire Is Threatened*, and he might call the second scene, *The empire Strikes Back*. In the first scene we see a group of astrologers or horoscope-readers who see a bright new star in the sky and decide to follow it. This behavior is not uncommon. Theologian Raymond Brown tells us in his book "The Birth of the Messiah" that it was widely believed in the Near Middle East that when a new king was born a bright new star was born. There were many such stories of powerful bright stars that were seen for the first time at the birth of a famous king. The magi then assume that there is a new king born in Jerusalem, and it is for this reason that they go to the place where Jewish kings live, Herod's palace.

Matthew tells us the magi asked Herod, "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." When King Herod "heard this, he was frightened." He felt threatened and he had reason to be. Herod was the family name of a group of rulers of Palestine from the year 55 before Christ to the end of the first century. Herod himself was made king by the Roman senate in the year 40 before Christ, but first he had to unseat the king of Judah, who was hostile to the Romans. After three years of war, aided by the Roman general Marc Anthony, Herod begins to reign as a puppet king of Rome in the year 37 before Christ. He reigned until the year 4 of the Christian era. Herod the Great had reasons to worry. He had heard all the prophecies about the Jewish Messiah and he had High Priests and Scribes by the dozen. He knew the expectations of the people for a warrior Messiah who could liberate the nation from the oppression of the Romans. If the stories were true, this Messiah would mean bad news for him.

Herod's ability to remain king was dependent upon his ability to keep the peace in Palestine. He couldn't afford more insurrections. A Jewish Messiah was a scary proposition for him. He was scared and he was threatened. Herod calls his High Priests and Scribes and learns that the prophecies pointed to Bethlehem of Judea. He tells the magi, "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." Of course we know that he does not intend to pay homage to the

child. If he wanted to do this, why didn't he accompany the magi? Why didn't he send some of his emissaries to accompany them? The answer is simple, it was not homage but murder he wanted. We know this because he ordered the death of the innocent. In this two-part drama we see how the empire is threatened by the announcement of the magi, and we see the empire striking back by killing all new born boys in Bethlehem.

What we have here is an incredible story of grace. Even though the Scribes are the teachers of the law and knew all the prophecies about the Messiah, they are not interested in

the least in the story the magi have to tell. They who know the theology and have read the holy books, miss the opportunity to come to the Messiah. The High Priests who are the religious leaders of the people and who also expected the coming of the Messiah also miss the opportunity to come to the Messiah. Herod, the King, whose kingship is seen as an image of God, Israel's true King, misses the opportunity to come to the Messiah. On the other hand, the shepherds, who are thought of as unrighteous and filthy and the Magi, who are seen as unbelieving foreigners receive the revelation of God and pay homage to the King of kings. The insiders reject the Messiah, while the outsiders follow the signs and are "overwhelmed with joy."

My friends, I don't know about you, but the fact that it is people on the outside that are willing to recognize and accept Jesus brings me great hope and great joy. If God allows, first, filthy shepherds and, then, magi who are foreigners and pagans to come and be the first to recognize Jesus as the King of the Jews, and to be the first to offer him the proper homage he deserves, then we should know that there is nothing in our lives that would keep God from bringing us to Jesus. There is nothing in our sinful lives to keep us from Jesus. Better yet, there is nothing in the sinful lives of other sinners we meet every day that will keep them away from Jesus. It is our job, therefore, to bring these sinners to Jesus, so they may find the same grace and the same forgiveness we have found.

Matthew ends his story by telling us that the magi went by another way. I believe this is symbolic language. After all, the Jesus movement was called "the way." I believe the magi left transformed, changed, and, perhaps, forgiven. They came face to face with the living God and their lives would never be the same. I don't know what brought you here today. I don't know what resentments, doubts, or fears you have deep in your heart. But, I pray, that you will go by another way. I pray that you too may be transformed. God is not appalled or repelled by who you are. He has chosen you to be the witnesses of his son's birth. He is the way, the truth and the life. I pray that today you will choose to go a different way. His way! *Amen!*