

The magi give us examples of incredible gifts. This is a tradition that is timeless. During World War II, citizens of Jamaica donated money to England for the building of a bomber to protect England. Soon others followed suit from places such as America and Ceylon. All of their contributions were given national attention. This civic generosity catalyzed donations to build airplanes and other necessary war expenses to fight Hitler. The one in charge, Lord Beaverbrook never issued a call for these gifts - he just acknowledged the recipients whether they gave the equivalent of \$1 or \$1 million dollars.¹

During the Christmas season there were blackouts. The King of England had to leave his palace, government officials were working around the clock, and no church bells were rung because everyone was afraid that the enemy bombers would use this to target the city. However, Churchill and other allied ministers had a cease fire so people gathered in their homes for Christmas!

In our story today, we have a leader, Herod, who commanded his advisors to do something - to give him a sort of gift - the Christ Child to give him "homage." The magi were smart and knew that Herod actually wanted to kill the child instead of honor him. They left by a different way because they knew that Herod was up to no good.

Herod was a family name. The original Herod is known as Herod the Great. He had sons and even great grandsons that ended up being a barrier to the Christian ministry. Herod was cruel, killing many even members of his own family.² The story goes that he brutally executed one of his wives and children because he believed they were plotting against him.³ Given his position, Herod did not need proof. Many rightfully believed he was paranoid. We know that Herod was jealous; he had all of the infant boys killed when he could not find Jesus himself. Just to be safe.

Herod was feeling insecure; if Jesus was the King of Jews, where does this leave Herod? Is it possible that Herod is less a king of Jews?

Herod sent the magi hoping they would follow his instructions. These magi are men outside the Jewish tradition. They are gentiles being sent into the world of Jews with a purpose: to find this thorn in his side so that he may, well remain great.

¹ Larson, E. (2020). *The Splendid and the Vile: A Saga of Churchill, Family, and Defiance During the Blitz*. Crown Publishing.

² Long, T.G. (1997) *Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: John Knox Press. p. 17-18

³ Johnson, E. (2021). Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12.

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

Herod really believed he was great. That he was the divine ruler, entitled to his position. We all know people like Herod. Hopefully, not as vicious. History is littered with ones such as this: Hitler, King Leopold II,⁴ and Idi Amin Dada to name a few. Herod likely hoped that these magi, and we do not know if there were three or three hundred of them, would bring Jesus back to him so that Herod the Great could continue to be in power. Fortunately for us, that is not how this story went.

The wise men were symbols of Gentile Christians - they looked to nature to be their revelation of God's being, yet found it in Christ's self rather than the star. Imagine what it would have been like for these people who were outside the Jewish faith to suddenly come before the Jewish king.⁵ They found Christ first by looking to nature. This is also true in our own lives. I can see God on a beautiful starry morning running toward the lake at Camp Allen, however, to truly experience the magnificence of God; I need the scriptures.

Hear the words of the Psalmist, that the magi certainly would have been familiar with, "That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, and the little hills bring righteousness."

This might be why they followed that star. They had faith that the star would lead them to something great, or more accurately someone great. Sometimes you can see someone young and easily imagine what they will be like in their life. Maybe a classmate in school, or a son or daughter.

Well, the story that I tell myself is when the magi saw this beautiful baby they looked at him and recognized the words of the Psalmist, "He shall defend the needy among the people; he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor. He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another."

Meanwhile, the chief priests and scribes, who also knew the scriptures, missed something that was right in front of them: the sign that God had made for them. The magi decided to combine both. He could see the greatness of the world and the greatness of Christ.

The wise men knew that Herod the Great could not offer them this eternal security. He could only offer them earthly possessions. They looked at this tiny child and knew: this was the path they were meant to follow. Also, in my imagination, these wise men recognized that this child was set for great things: and not just joyfully. Great things that change the world. Great things that involve suffering.

The gifts they offered were gifts of wealth, that's gold, worship, that's incense, and finally perfume used at burial, which is myrrh.

These gifts foreshadow what was to come: Worshiping this King would be crucified. Myrrh means bitter in arabic. Remember the story of Ruth when Naomi asked to be called Mara, which means bitter in Hebrew. These languages are related. Still, when myrrh touches the air it turns to deep gold (very regal) and then to the color of blood against the bark of the tree. Blood against a tree. Much like the image of Jesus with his arms outstretched on the cross. Yet, when Myrrh is burned, it creates an enticing aroma.⁶

⁴ See this article from the Philadelphia Tribune, https://www.phillytrib.com/commentary/coard-king-leopold-twice-the-monster-hitler-was/article_597c993b-5e60-549f-b873-76f85815c0cf.html

⁵ Long, T.G. (1997) *Westminster Bible Companion*. Louisville: John Knox Press. p.16-18

⁶ See more about this from Johnson, E. (2021). Commentary on Matthew 2:1-12.

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

These senses remind me of the story of Jesus. He is elusive and mysterious, crucified, while enticing us to greatness.

On Epiphany, we celebrate the birth of Jesus knowing that he came to show us God's love for us. Sadly, the only way we could understand was through a great sacrifice.

When we are given a bold gift we react with a smile, by giving a hug, or writing a note. When the magi visited Jesus, we do not know what reaction he had to the gifts from the magi. I think though, that in some ways the magi's gifts were a reaction to the gift Christ would give to humanity: God's love and forgiveness open to all people.

The question now is how do we respond to this gift. We reacted with joy and generosity as we give our tithes during the stewardship season! This church has had forty more pledges than last year - this is certainly a sign of our joy of Christ's gift. We will see at the 11:00 a.m. worship service the reaction of the children's ministry as they put on an Epiphany pageant: they will show Christ's light to each other. We see the reaction in the brotherhood of St. Andrew who meet regularly and serve this parish without fail. Yes, we are called to react to the gift of Christ with joy and service. So let us learn from the wise men. Let us find Christ in nature and in scripture. Let us offer our gifts to God in thanksgiving. Amen.