

**Epiphany Sunday/January 6, 2019**

**Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12;**

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*"What Gift"*

Today, January 6th, is the day we in the church celebrate the **Epiphany of our Lord**, the revelation of the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Or as it is implied earlier in the gospel of Matthew when he says, *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel' (meaning 'God with us.')*" That is, God in human flesh, to dwell with us, like us and in us.

And this is all based upon this story about the visit of the magi, that is related to us here in the birth narrative of Matthew's gospel. And nowhere else. Not in any of the other gospels, not in Paul's letters, the Acts of the Apostles or any other New Testament writing. There is a non-canonical Christian writing called the *Syriac Infancy Gospel* that tells a very similar story not compiled until sometime in the 6th century. And while there are some passages from the Hebrew scriptures that are sometimes cited by Christians as foretelling this event (Isaiah 60:1-12; Psalm 72:1-14; and the story of Balaam the seer who saw the rising of David's star: Numbers 24:17), it is odd that Matthew doesn't include his usual statement saying *"this took place to fulfill the prophecy of such and such or the prophet so and so."* Matthew doesn't seem interested in this event as something that is fulfilling a prophecy. So what is his purpose in including this story in his narrative about Jesus' birth?

First let me clarify a few things about this story. The term *"Magi"* comes from the Greek *magus or magoi* (plural), and is generally understood as referring to a class or caste of religious and political priests or astrologers who studied the stars and the heavens, interpreting them and relating them to events on earth. And while Matthew doesn't really state where they are from, other than *"from the east"*, scholars suggest their origins as possibly Persia, Babylon or the desert areas east of Palestine. Some scholars associate them to Zoroastrianism or the followers of Zoroaster, one of the oldest continuing religions on earth. They are not *kings* as it is sometimes interpreted and *wise men* is thought of as a much too general translation. Also, there is no mention in Matthew to their number. Western Christianity has long held that there were 3, while other traditions have suggested 2, 4 and in the Eastern Church, 12 magi have been the preferred number. So when we sing, *"We three kings of orient are . . ."* we are really not getting it right.

So, what is Matthew's purpose in telling this story here at the beginning of his gospel, his account of Jesus' life? Well, one possibility might be that he is simply relating a story that had been passed down. A part of the oral tradition or history that he had received as he began writing his gospel sometime in the late 60s or early 70s of the first century. That is a possibility, though we have no other record of any such event occurring from other historians of the time nor from Roman or Hebraic records.

There was, however two events that happened just a few years before Matthew would have written his gospel. In 66 A.D. the Jewish historian Josephus wrote *"Thus it was that the wretched people were deluded at that time by charlatans and pretended messengers of the deity; while they neither heeded nor believed in the manifest portents that foretold the coming desolation, but, as if thunderstruck and bereft of eyes and mind, disregarded the plain warnings*

of God. So it was when a star, resembling a sword, stood over the city, and a comet which continued for a year." (War 6.5.4 288-289). Josephus, a historian, tells about a star, a comet, that shown at that time, during the year 66 A.D., over the region of Judea. That same year, Tiridates I, the King of Armenia and a Zoroastrian priest, traveled with other magi to Rome, to be given authority over Armenia by the Roman Emperor Nero. The caravan must have been impressive. A report on Wikipedia states "On his long trek he was accompanied by his wife and children and two of his brothers. His escort included an imposing retinue, comprising many feudal lords, several sages, 3,000 Parthian horsemen, and also a large number of Romans. His route lay across Thrace, through Illyria, on the eastern shores of the Adriatic and Picenum, in northeastern Italy. The journey took nine months, and Tiridates I rode on horseback, with his children and queen at his side." Could the author of the gospel of Matthew been inspired by these events to create a story to accentuate the meaning of the birth of Jesus?

We can't know for sure. What we do know, is that Matthew was writing to a predominantly Jewish-Christian congregation, who were asking the question about whether or not Gentiles should be included into this new faith? Was the Gospel of Jesus Christ something that non-Jews should be invited into? Was it God's intention to include others, outside of God's chosen people? Certainly the Hebrew prophets had made it clear. Israel was to be a "light to the nations." (Is.42:6, 49:6). And Jesus taught that his followers were to be "the light of the world" and the "salt of the earth." (Matt.5:14, 13).

Matthew clearly believes the Gentiles are to be included. And so he writes this story, right at the beginning of his gospel, which tells of Gentiles, foreigners, followers of a different religious faith, who follow a star, a sign within God's created order, who come bearing gifts. Gifts for a king, gold, frankincense and myrrh. They come with the gift of wisdom, able to see the evil interests of King Herod and to know that they must depart without letting Herod know where the child is. And they come with the gift of adoration, with hearts open to understanding God's purpose in this little child, born in humble means, and destined for some great purpose.

Matthew portrays these Gentiles as heroes in this story. They see and know what the powerful King Herod and all those who hold power and might in this world, completely miss. **Emmanuel, God with us**, right there in the child Jesus. A God who is for *all* people, not just some.

There is something important about this story, that rarely, if ever gets mentioned. The magi *do not stay* with Jesus, worshipping him. They go back to their homes, to their own countries, their own people, aware that they have seen a *manifestation of God*, in a *foreign* land, with *foreign* ways. They do *not* become "**Christian.**" Their awareness that the *sacred* lives and breathes in another part of the world, where people live, think, pray and believe differently than they do, should give us pause. Perhaps the God that exists for *all* people is manifested in many ways.

The story of the magi in Matthew's gospel is a story about *gifts*. No, not the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the magi brought. Their gifts were only in *response* to the real gift. The gift of God to the world. The gift of a new way of being, of thinking, of living. It is the gift of inclusion, of acceptance of others, of freedom from oppression. It is a gift that proclaims that it is no longer military might, violence, or the powers of domination that shall rule the world. It is the gift of the **power of Love** given to *all* people, *all* of creation. And that is the Epiphany we celebrate today. Amen.