

EPIPHANY

sermon preached at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Medina, WA
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The Feast of the Epiphany [transferred]/ January 10, 2010

As of yesterday afternoon, my in-laws hadn't yet taken down their tree or put away their Christmas decorations. This was just fine with my daughter Sarah, who especially loves to play with her grandparents' cute little crèche scene. By the time she was done with it, Jesus was being visited not only by angels, shepherds and Magi, but also by characters from other universes: Dorothy and the Tin Man, Dora and Boots, Tinkerbell, and a host of Disney princesses batting their gigantic eyelashes at the newborn king.

With every year that I age, I sink a little more deeply into the rhythm of the church year. I try not to let it get in the way too much—that is, I do my best to refrain from wishing people “Happy New Year” at the end of November and still saying “Merry Christmas” on January 5. It can be a little disconcerting to the uninitiated. So if I've ever given you grief for efficiently throwing out your fire hazard of a Christmas tree on December 31, I apologize.

One of the more esoteric joys of the church calendar is the Feast of the Epiphany and the season that follows it. If you ask regular churchgoers to name the six seasons of the church year, you'll find that Epiphany is the one they're most likely to forget. Those who do remember Epiphany remember it as the day the three kings brought their gifts to Jesus. The proper date for that feast is January 6, and we have decided to transfer it to a Sunday this year so we can all enjoy it together.

But Epiphany is also a season, and a very important one. The Sundays after Epiphany help us understand the man we worship as the Son of God, removing him from that cross and putting him back down on earth. It's all too easy to think of Christ only as a transcendent being. We need to remember the main point: that Jesus was human just like the rest of us, and that he said and did a lot of things in his thirty years that purportedly have an effect on us in our everyday Christian lives.

Let's go back to the Magi, though, because it does start with them. They come straggling into Bethlehem, late every year, apparently because they've had to travel so far. And I've picked up a few factoids about the Magi that you might find interesting. They only appear in Matthew's Gospel, whereas the shepherds only appear in Luke's Gospel.

Luke wrote about shepherds because he wanted to show that Jesus came to save the poor and simple people, not just the wealthy and educated. Likewise, I think Matthew wrote about the Magi because he wanted his Jewish readers to understand that Jesus didn't just come for the sake of the Jews. Wise men from other traditions were also subject to him.

But what were these wise men? The Greek word MA-GHEE, Magi, gives us our word magic. The Magi were Zoroastrians—star readers—but they weren't necessarily considered charlatans. In that time and place, most people considered astrology a form of hard science; keep in mind how many centuries would pass before the dawn of the scientific method. For Matthew to assert that astrologers read in the stars that the Messiah would be born and then came and paid him homage is to say that Jesus' birth was important to everybody in the world.

So why do we so often hear them called the Three Kings? We have today's readings from Isaiah and the Psalms to thank for that. Centuries before Jesus was born, Isaiah wrote: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." And in Psalm 72, we read, "The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts. All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service."

This psalm is an ode to the sitting king of Israel—possibly Solomon at the time it was written. But we use it today to explain how the best kind of king would treat people: he would rule righteously, defend the needy, deliver the poor, and redeem their lives from oppression and violence. All other kings would bow to him because of his wisdom. Matthew's wise men would not have been kings, but tradition has conflated the original story and its associated readings so that we imagine them so. You'll even find that most nativity scenes feature Magi of different races and ethnicities: this also is to show the worldwide appeal of Jesus.

In Matthew's story, the Magi come to Jerusalem first and ask around: "Where do your ancient writings say the King of the Jews is supposed to be born?" King Herod hears about the Magi and asks them their business. Now, I know these men are supposed to be wise, but I'm not sure they're very smart. Would you go to the sitting king and tell him everything you know about the birth of a potential rival to the throne? Naturally, Herod feels threatened. But he sends them on their way and urges them to return with information on where this child is, so that Herod himself can supposedly worship Jesus, too.

The Magi go on to Bethlehem, the bright star leading them all the way to the house. And yes, it's a house—not a stable. Again, there are no shepherds or angels in Matthew's Gospel—and no stable, and no innkeeper, and no census. All of that is in Luke's version of the story and no other.

Matthew does not say how many Magi there were or give them names. We imagine three of them because three gifts are mentioned: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The first two gifts come, again, from today's Isaiah reading: "They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord." Gold would be a worthy gift for a king, of course. Incense was used in worship then as it is today, so frankincense would imply that this king should be praised as you would praise God. Already, we're no longer talking about your standard issue king, but a very special one.

It's the third gift, though, that clarifies and deepens our understanding of Jesus' kingship. Myrrh was used in burials. This dark, bitter-smelling resin was burned at funerals and was placed in the coffins of important rulers. Matthew uses myrrh to foreshadow the death of Jesus and its importance for the entire world.

Having honored the young Jesus, the Magi prepare to go back to Herod and give away his location. Interestingly, we heard this story read last week, and Steve said a lot of good things about it. Luckily, an angel visits our naïve wise men and informs them that Herod wants to kill the child. So they give Herod the slip and go home by another route.

Jesus isn't out of danger, though. When the Magi don't return to him, Herod is furious. In one of the most tragic scenes in the entire Bible, Herod orders his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and kill every child under age two. Alert Bible readers will see in this story a parallel to the first chapter of Exodus, in which Pharaoh orders the death of all the newborn Israelite boys, and baby Moses narrowly escapes in a basket floating down the Nile. Let us hope that Herod's slaughter of the innocents is a literary device and not a historical occurrence. Either way, Matthew's point is clear: King Herod is as bad to his own subjects as the Egyptian Pharaoh was thousands of years before.

Ironically, it is to Egypt that the Holy Family escapes. An angel warns Joseph about the impending massacre, and off they go. They only return once Herod is dead, and even then, they settle in a new place in order to avoid detection. They come out of Egypt, just as the ancient Israelites did, and they settle in Nazareth.

This is the story of Epiphany: Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus. From now until mid-February, we'll be hearing more about Jesus in the Season of Epiphany. I hope there might be some epiphanies along the way for all of us.

Every year, we hear certain stories during this season. Because we're celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany today, we're not hearing the story of Jesus' baptism, which would otherwise be observed on the First Sunday after Epiphany. So mark that place in your minds: Jesus is baptized, and his ministry begins. Next Sunday, we'll hear a story from John's Gospel about what happened next: Jesus' first miracle. The stories in the weeks that follow are selected to give us a glimpse of the early work of Jesus: the calling of the fishermen as his first disciples, and the teachings and healings that show Jesus' impact on the world around him.

Epiphany is a season of variable length. It leads up to Ash Wednesday, which is placed six and a half weeks before Easter. Easter jumps all over the calendar because its date relies on the cycles of the moon relative to the spring equinox. And isn't that already much more than you wanted to know? Suffice it to say that every year, we tell as many stories about Jesus' ministry as we can before the clock runs out and Lent begins.

Every year on the final Sunday after Epiphany, we talk about the Transfiguration. I'll save that story for whoever is going to preach on February 14. But it's important because Matthew, Mark, and Luke make the Transfiguration the turning point of their Gospels. The stories of Epiphany all come from Jesus' early ministry and lead up to the Transfiguration. After that, everything changes. Jesus' ministry takes on a hard edge, as if he has been given the dubious gift of clarity. His parables reflect a tone of judgment, and Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and the Cross, an appropriate backdrop for the season of Lent.

But that's a long way off. Today, enjoy one more time the image of Jesus as a newborn baby, bringing God's light into this dark world. Doesn't every newborn baby do that to some degree?

Imagine all the people of the world—and maybe even fictional characters from your childhood—coming to adore Jesus, and to worship this very different kind of king. Imagine what kinds of gifts you would bring to the holy child, and then go and use your gifts to spread a little light yourself. Amen.