

THE SCIENCE AND FAITH OF THE MAGI



Scripture:

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. ³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. ⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. ⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"
⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "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." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold,

frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



THE SCIENCE AND FAITH OF THE MAGI

On this Sunday every year, the Revised Common Lectionary gives a list of scripture readings to use in worship. This Sunday they gave us a choice to either celebrate Epiphany and read a passage about the visit of the Magi to the Christ child (which is an event reflected in both the Old Testament and the New Testaments), or to study the baptism of our Lord by John the Baptist. When we don't have a baptism to do, I always choose to celebrate Epiphany.

The Twelve Days of Christmas begin Christmas day and end on Epiphany, January 6th which happened to be last Friday. We celebrated Epiphany at the Friday evening Vespers service with a reading of this same scripture and I also read excerpts from O Henry's short story, *The Gift of the Magi*.

There are good reasons to focus on the season of Epiphany and not just skip over it to Easter. It gives us time to focus on the mission of the church which is to show the world our way of imitating Christ's love in action. The term *epiphany* means "to show" or "to make known" or "to reveal." The birth of Christ is a revelation! In some Central and South American countries they call it Three Kings' Day, and they bake a special cake and wait until January 6th or 7th to open Christmas presents.

EPIPHANY

I look forward to focusing on Epiphany every year because I'm never quite ready to move on from Bethlehem into "ordinary time." There is so much in the Epiphany event to explore! Today I will focus on:

- 1) The scientific imagination in the story of the Magi. And...
- 2) How this Epiphany event involves gentiles from non-Jewish far away nations who traveled a very long distance to adore and worship the Christ child.

This Epiphany event opens up the ministry of Jesus to all the world, not just to Israel. It signifies hope in Christ for all, but especially for those who are suffering and being oppressed under the rule of a terrible leader such as King Herod.

When I think of the birth of Jesus, the wise Magi and the foundational story we all know, I think the Bible inspired Star Wars. Has anyone seen Rogue One? In all the Star Wars movies, the wise ones seek to know and help the one born with the power of the Force who is predicted to have the power to protect the vulnerable people in the universe from the tyrannical abusive people on the dark side. That's basically the foundational story in Star Wars and in the birth story as well. Jesus is the light of the world and Herod is like Darth Vader. The Magi are like Obi Wan Kenobi. I could go on but I will spare you more comparisons.

I believe all great stories of salvation and grace and love and the triumph of good over evil have their roots in our Christian history of Jesus coming to earth to show us the Way we are to be and live with a purpose to heal and bless and love one another.

Dennis Bratcher who edits an internet Christian ministry called *The Voice* expands on this when he says, Epiphany is a time for focusing on Christian community and fellowship, especially in healing the divisions of prejudice and bigotry that we all too often create between God's children." So how does Epiphany do that? How does Epiphany address prejudice and bigotry? Bratcher explains, "The Wise Magi who brought gifts to the child Jesus were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as "King," and so were the first to "show" or "reveal" Jesus to a wider world as the incarnate

Christ. This act of worship by the Magi, which corresponded to Simeon's blessing (found in Luke Chapter 2) he predicts that this child Jesus will be "a light for revelation to the gentiles." This was one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of all races, and that the work of God in the world would not be limited to only a few."

THE WISE MAGI

The wise magi from the East had been examining sacred texts while trying to understand the stars in the universe. They saw an unusual cluster of planets or stars that they believe predicted the Messiah had come to earth. (Not just a Jewish Messiah but a savior for the whole world.) Modern day astronomers believe the star of Bethlehem could have been a comet, a supernova, planets coming together in a triple conjunction, or a supernatural occurrence. There are many fascinating theories.

Most who study the Magi tend to agree that they were scientists from the East, probably from Persia (which is now Iran). These were Zoroastrian scientists and philosophers called "magi" from the Greek word *magos* which means philosopher-astrologer-priests.

The Zoroastrian faith is one of the world's oldest religions. Zoroastrians are interested in studying the origins of the universe and they ascribe to the teachings of the Iranian prophet: Zoroaster, who lived in the 6th century before the birth of Jesus.

EXOTIC ALIENS

Reverend Tom Long, who teaches preaching at the PCUSA seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, explains the significance of the Persian Magi coming to visit the Christ child by calling them exotic "aliens." He says, "This alien exoticism is an intrinsic part of Matthew's story of the wise men." Long says, "Even the gentiles come from afar to bow down before the king of the Jews, but boy oh boy, these aren't just any gentiles. These are not the sort of next-door gentiles who just slipped over the border into Judea to help out with the wheat harvest. These are magi, astrologers,

magicians from the East, carrying gold and perfumes and tracking their journey by the stars. These are gentiles with the volume turned up to eleven causing Herod and the Pharisees to get all upset.

Long imagines the Magi were like Gladys Knight and the Pips, woop-wooping into town on that midnight train from Georgia.

However, the magi's arrival should have been expected. As we read in the book of Isaiah they were told that "all the nations" would stream to the Lord. Yet they never imagined that they would arrive with horoscopes, fragrant aromatics, and a Persian religion.

Long invites us to imagine the unimaginable: that the God of Israel has in generosity turned the face of mercy toward all nations, and that magi from the East and people from California, and India, and even Iowa can stream to Jesus and learn God's ways.

In other words, the story of the magi cracks open the story of "Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham" to let us see that there is a place there for those who are near and even for those who come from afar.

No wonder, then, that Herod and all of Jerusalem shake like leaves in the wind when the wise men show up and ask about the king of the Jews. The question implies a wider and more gracious kingdom in play than the shriveled little precinct Herod assumes he controls. What's more, it hints that the murderous Herod has no control over access. Jesus is for everyone. Always was even before his birth and always will be.

INCLUSIVE ACCESS TO JESUS

So Epiphany is about inclusive access to Jesus, adoring Jesus, sacrificing our lives to

seek out a relationship with Jesus, and using our gifts and talents to help others come to know Jesus.

The focus in the final lesson of this Epiphany event is about the hospitality of Jesus. Mary and Joseph and Jesus welcomed these alien strangers into their home. They did not limit access to the love of God even though there were many reasons to be concerned for their safety. They showed love to the strangers.

THE MAGI'S GIFTS

As a result of their hospitality, the Magi gave their gifts which provided plenty of wealth to sustain Christ's family when they became refugees in Egypt. The valuable gifts from the Magi, who journeyed one-thousand miles to honor and adore Jesus, would have provided for Jesus' needs a long time. A gold brick in today's time is worth about \$325,000. In the time of Christ, it would have probably been even more valuable. The spices (frankincense and myrrh) were also very valuable at that time and may have even been as costly as gold in terms of weight.

Science, faith, inclusive hospitality, sacrifice, wisdom, joyful adoration, and generosity, all wrapped up together created this Epiphany event. How do we carry these qualities with us out into the world? How can 2017 be your year of faith, inclusive hospitality, sacrifice, wisdom and generosity while you joyfully adore Jesus with your life?

Every day you have the gift of a new day. Rather than make New Year's resolutions to lose weight and eat healthier again, ponder how you will use all your gifts and blessings

to show the world you love Jesus in 2017.
Amen

Benediction:

Go home another way as the Magi did to escape Herod. Go home the way of Jesus who hopes you will intentionally run into those most vulnerable and in need. Your purpose in this world is to help the least of these as if you were helping the Christ child. Go find them wherever they are.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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