

“The Gift of the Gentiles”

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday
January 5, 2020

Rev. Jeffrey H. Rickards

January 6th marks the Feast Day or Festival of the Epiphany on the church’s liturgical calendar.

Epiphany, which means “manifestation,” concludes the twelve days of the Christmas season with a celebration of God’s glory as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Since the Day of the Epiphany falls tomorrow on a Monday, we do not have a worship service to mark the occasion, I thought we would celebrate it on the day before - thus this service will serve as Epiphany Sunday.

This way, we will enter next Sunday’s worship without some previous recognition of the Epiphany, and this morning we can fittingly conclude the Christmas season with a timely reading of Matthew’s visit of the magi or wise men.

Christmas cards and carols as well as Nativity sets or scenes would have us believe that the shepherds and wise men were present together in a stable and before a manger shortly after the birth of the Christ child.

It wasn’t until I formally studied the New Testament as a seminarian when I realized only the gospels of Matthew and Luke contained birth narratives and each evangelist told the story of Jesus’ origins in a different way to reach their respective audiences.

For the most part, biblical scholars agree that Luke was a Gentile and Matthew, a Jew; so that they were well suited and situated to address their intended readers and hearers.

On the last Sunday of Advent, Luke introduced us to Zechariah the priest and his wife, Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, who set the scene for the story of Mary and Joseph.

On Christmas Eve we heard Luke's well-known story of the proclamation and enrollment ordered by the Roman emperor Augustus, the travel of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth in a stable, the angelic choir, and the shepherd's visit.

Last Sunday, Luke's infancy account ended with the presentation of Jesus in the temple, the prophecy of the elderly and devout Simeon and Anna, and the return of the family to their home in Nazareth.

Matthew gives us an entirely different narrative.

Instead of focusing on Mary, Matthew relates the story from Joseph's perspective and parentage. "We Three Kings of Orient are," are not necessarily three, certainly not kings, and most certainly not wise.

In lieu of an account of a census that brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, Matthew begins not in a stable in Bethlehem, with the infant Jesus lying in a manger but in a home some time after Jesus' infancy and then recounts their flight to Egypt.

Only after they learn again from an angelic dream that King Herod, who sought to kill Jesus, the rivals "King of the Jews," had died, do they return to the land of Israel and relocate from Bethlehem in Judea to Nazareth in Galilee.

Luke stresses Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, while Matthew makes this claim as well.

Matthew also portrays Jesus as a new Moses.

While Luke emphasizes that all the figures in the infancy account were faithful to the

Torah and the Prophets, Matthew makes the same point in a different way by quoting the Torah and Prophets, over and over again, to show Jesus' continuity with them.

Some biblical scholars sometimes delight in pointing out discrepancies between Matthew and Luke, as if a different version of a story calls the entire tradition into question.

Luke has already told us that other versions and sources of the story of Jesus exist (1:1-4).

As I said before, each evangelist has different concerns to be shared with readers,

While it is important to ask, "What do these stories mean for their original audiences?" our role is to ask ourselves, "What do these stories mean to me, and what have they meant to our faith communities today?"

Matthew's second chapter, the assigned reading for Epiphany, opens with the notice of the will of "King Herod."

That word king introduces a challenge to Matthew's readers: are they going to obey and follow "King Herod" propped up by the Roman Empire and ruling by intimidation and violence, or will they turn to the new king, already introduced as "son of David" and as part of David's royal lineage.

Matthew brilliantly portrays the challenge to King Herod in the opening verses, when the wise men enter Jerusalem and ask, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2).

Matthew packs numerous points into this question.

First, the inquiry about this newborn king is tremendously naïve, for King Herod is not about to cede his authority to this child, or any child.

In fact, Herod had some of his sons and his wife executed because of his paranoia.

Given the question, anyone who still considers these questions to be "wise" might want to reconsider.

They not only have denied Herod's kingship, they

also, have unknowingly put his heir in danger!

Second, Matthew begins a pattern, seen throughout his Gospel, of presenting people in authority- whether Herod the Great or Pontius Pilate or the high priests- as working in opposition to the “Kingdom of Heaven” that Jesus proclaims. Jesus, himself, even speaks about “those who rule the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around” (20:25): his model of servant-leadership, of being a servant to all, is just the opposite.

One could argue that the wise men are kings, although Matthew never explicitly says so, Isaiah, chapter 60, verse three speaks of kings coming to worship the God of Israel, and verse six adds that they will be “caring gold and incense” For Matthew to call the wise men “kings” would be odd.

To the contrary they represent another kind of figure. Several manuscripts represent the wise men as “Magi.” The magi, who are said to come from the “East” give the story an exotic flavor.

Ancient magi were persons reputed to be adept at astronomy as well as astrology for the purpose of dream interpretation and fortune telling.

In this case, Matthew portrays them as “wise men” or astrologers, who have found the rising of a star to be of world-significance.

It was common in antiquity to associate the birth or death of a great person with heavenly signs.

But there is more than meets the eye in Matthew’s identification of these magi as from the “East.” The word Matthew uses for the “East” literally means “the rising,” that is, the rising of the sun. To the Jewish Christian audience of Matthew, the rising of the sun in the East readily suggests the image of light, which is often associated

with salvation in the Bible.

In our Old Testament reading assigned for this day,
we hear these words: “Arise, shine, for your light
has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.”

Isaiah’s version of salvation includes a pilgrimage
of the nations, who will come to Israel’s light,
to worship the God of Israel.

The Gentile magi are to be understood as
enacting the fulfillment of this prophecy.

According to Matthew, a star guided the wise men
to Jerusalem, and from there to Bethlehem, where
it stopped directly over Joseph and Mary’s house.

Suffice it to say that the people in Matthew’s age
did not know about thermonuclear fusion or even
how big stars are.

In the ancient world, stars were sentient beings,
the souls of the righteous or angels.

The star over Bethlehem is a messenger; it is
about the search for meaning.

The wise men arrive not at a stable as in Luke or
at a cave as Saint Francis of Assisi would have
us believe, but at a house.

While King Herod’s experts know of the prophecy
and the location of the long-predicted king,
it is gentile wise men or Magi, not Temple
authorities or the nominal “King of the Jews,”
who come to the home.

Already Matthew is telling his audience that
some Jews and some Gentiles will accept
Jesus and his kingship.

Others such as the Jewish and Roman hierarchy
will not.

Not only do the Gentile wise men visit the child,
but they also bring gifts- the famous gold,
frankincense and myrrh.

Matthew does not tell us whether the gifts had
any symbolic value, but the absence of

such an explanation has not stopped speculation. Irenaeus, the second century Church Father from Lyon (in present day France), proposed that the gifts had practical purposes; the gold represented Jesus' royal status; the myrrh was to anoint his corpse and so to show his humanity, the frankincense, which was burned on altars, symbolized his divinity.

What is interesting and maybe even unknown by most of us were the traditions that arose from the gifts of the Magi.

The idea that these were three Magi or wise men comes from the three gifts

There may have been many more Magi.

As churches patronage developed during the era of Christendom, wealthy donors would arrange to have themselves and their family members depicted as Magi who had come to worship the Christ Child.

They were dressed to impress.

The eventual depiction of the Magi as three kings, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, likely comes from Psalm 72:10-11, which reads: Let the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all the kings fall down before him, and all nations give him service."

By the way, this Psalm is labelled "of Solomon" and Jesus is, in Matthew's gospel (but not Luke's), a direct descendant of Solomon.

Mary and Joseph do not say anything to the Magi, or the Magi to them.

The important thing for Matthew is their presence-gentiles will and can worship Jesus as their King.

The scene ends with the notice that the Magi, like Joseph, and later, Pilate's wife, received dreams of warning.

Advised against returning to Herod, "they went back to their own country by another route" (2:12).

They travel out of the text into legend.

Beloved people of God, I wonder if Matthew is hinting
at something more.

The Greek word for 'route' is hodos (hence the
term odometer)!

According to the Book of Acts, the people who gathered
in the name of Jesus were not called "Christian."

They were called followers of the way.

Thus, like the Magi in Matthew and the shepherds in Luke,
who became early evangelists, we too, have
a story to tell.

Neither group has the full story but they are on the way.

Matthew's gospel ends with the risen Jesus' command
to go baptize and make disciples of all nations (28:29),
his gospel begins with an anticipatory visit of the
Gentiles to Bethlehem to worship the newborn Messiah.

The Magi stands for all nations, including us,
who worship Jesus and see in him the manifestations
of the glory of God.

Amen.