

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Isaiah 60: 1 – 6
Ephesians 3: 1 – 12Psalm 72: 1 – 7, 10 – 14
Matthew 2: 1 – 12

A funny little story in which peculiar characters make a cameo appearance in the Gospel of Matthew. A funny little story that features unnumbered, unnamed, unidentified-in-any-way people who walk across the stage of history in two scenes, never to be heard about – or from – again. A funny little story that announces to the whole world that everything has changed. A funny little story that brings God’s Good News, not just to the chosen people of Israel, but to all the world. To us.

Today is the Feast of the Epiphany, a feast day on January 6th, that the Church has observed since at least the 4th century. And down through the ages, this simple little story of a Gentile visitation to the Christ child has consistently fascinated us because of its mysteriousness. Who are these people? How many are there? Where do they come from? What is the significance of their seemingly odd baby shower gifts? How do they know who Jesus is? If they are so important, why do we never hear from them again? We can get so caught up in wondering about them that we lose sight of what their real role is in the grander scheme of things. I know that for a fact because even while I was working on this sermon, I ended up going down a rabbit hole which I will share with you!

Epiphany comes from the Greek word which means “manifestation.” The Feast of the Epiphany, and the church season of varying lengths which follows it all the way to Lent, are all about the manifestation of God in this world through the person and work of Jesus. And again, not just to the *Jewish* world, but to ALL the world. So, our readings during Epiphany will be about how God is made manifest – made visible – in the miracles, words, teachings and actions of Jesus. Made manifest to anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear that is.

But back to the magi and going down the rabbit hole. There has been an awful lot of art and music created about these people whom we know essentially nothing about. Perhaps because these people seem so exotic, so other, so mysterious. Perhaps because their appearance is so fleeting, and we get only a quick glimpse of them.

They are variously referred to as magi, wise men, kings or magicians. First of all, we don’t know that they are all men, though they probably are. The old joke is that, had they been women, the gifts would have been rather more practical, like diapers and baby blankets.

‘Magi’ comes from the Greek word in Matthew’s text, *μαγοι*, which is in the plural form. It could mean ‘scholars’ (or wise persons), but it is also used in Luke’s Book of Acts, where we translate it as ‘magician’ because its use can refer to sorcerers and practitioners of the occult as well. The Greek word is derived from a Persian term for philosopher-astrologer-priests who were active during the empire of the Medes, about 600 years before Jesus. As for referring to them as ‘kings,’ there is absolutely nothing in Matthew’s text that implies royalty. But the prophet Isaiah’s words, “and kings [shall come] to the brightness of your dawn” (and the Psalmists’) have probably influenced many people over the centuries, including John Henry Hopkins, Jr. who penned the famous carol *We Three Kings* in 1857. One wonders, if they *are* so wise, why don’t they think more about asking King Herod about his successor? But perhaps intelligence is not the same thing as wisdom.

How many of them are there? Matthew doesn't indicate. The reason we think that there are three is: a) we've sung *We Three Kings* lots of times; and b) there are three gifts named, and presumably no one comes empty-handed. But traditions vary. Syriac Christians in southeastern Turkey put the number at twelve.

Where do they come from? ("We three kings of Orient are..." orient=east) The traditional answer is Persia (what is today Iran), and that they are Zoroastrians who study the movements of the stars and planets. But not everyone agrees. The Rev. Dwight Longenecker supports something very different. He thinks they may have come from the far south of the Arabian Peninsula, the Kingdom of Sheba. As in "the Queen of Sheba." Present day Yemen. Perhaps the only connection to Persia is the use of the word 'magi.' After all, by the time Jesus is born, the culture of the Medes in which the magi flourished is long gone.

Longenecker writes that the religion of Persia during the Roman Empire is a mash up of belief systems. In addition to Zoroastrianism, there are tribal religions, worshipping of Greek and Roman deities, and a host of other options. If so, why would they even care about a new-born King of the Jews? So, instead of the word 'magi' indicating the origin of these folks, Longenecker suggests that we consider their gifts.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh, or 'gold, frank innocence and mirth' as a gypsy in Robertson Davies' novel, *The Rebel Angels*, says. These gifts, combined with the prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures, Longenecker says points to the Kingdom of Sheba, to the far southeast of Judea.

Why Sheba? Apparently, archaeologists are increasingly convinced that the Kingdom of Sheba's influence extended deep into East Africa. Sheba was known for its wealth, particularly its gold from the mines of Africa. Secondly, the Boswellia tree, from which gum is tapped and used to make frankincense, is native only to Arabia and Somalia. Thirdly, the commiphora tree, from which the resin used to make myrrh is derived, grows only on the Arabian Peninsula. These three 'rare and precious' commodities are what help make Sheba so rich and powerful. Of course, anyone could obtain these three gifts since Judea is along major trade routes, but Longenecker posits, what if the gifts are not simply opulent gifts, but ones meant to be diplomatic? Envoys bringing the best of what their country has to offer? Something representative of just them? (If they were from GA, perhaps peanuts, peaches and pecans!) If we remember back to the Queen of Sheba, when she comes to visit and pay homage to King Solomon, she brings with her all kinds of rich gifts including gold and spices. Several chapters later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself will refer to the Queen of Sheba's visit and her gifts, but Jesus will note that 'one greater than Solomon is here,' implying perhaps that kings from that very same place had already come to pay HIM homage. If we look back at Hebrew prophecy, both our lesson from Isaiah and the Psalm, among others, speak of kings and caravans coming from Sheba with gifts of gold and frankincense.

Then, there is perhaps one more tantalizing possibility: the Incense Road. It is an ancient trade route where spices from India, incense from Arabia and exotic riches from Africa all travel up the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, through Palestine to the port of Gaza before being loaded onto ships headed for Rome and the rest of Europe. If so, then the magi would perhaps have good reason for knowing something about the history and the politics of the Jews. They would perhaps feel comfortable going to the Jewish court and speaking with Herod.

So, a rather deep rabbit hole, but something I found fascinating, as I hope you do. But no matter how we picture them – the pointy cone hats and flowing robes covered in astrological signs of

Persian mystics (just my image which probably has more to do with Merlin or Disney); or the gold crowns, ermine-trimmed velvet robes and tights of medieval or Renaissance kings; or the rope bands and checkered headscarves of Arabian sheikhs; or the bathrobes and paper Burger King crowns from a children's pageant – no matter how we see them, no matter how hard we try to answer all our questions about them, we miss the whole point of their cameo appearance in Matthew if we think of them simply as the final scene around the manger, as somehow closing the door on Christmas. They are, in fact, opening the door to the future of the whole world.

If Advent was all about waiting for the promised coming of the Messiah, the Christ, then Epiphany is all about the expectations that come with the Messiah's arrival. Exactly how will God be made manifest in this Savior? The magi and their gifts point towards the impact that Jesus will have upon all of humanity - our societies and all those things (and people) that purport to claim our allegiances. [trad. Interpretation: gold – kingship; frankincense – priesthood; myrrh – death] This strange, little story says that, even as God has come into the world, the world will come to God. This strange, little story says that a new political order is taking shape and that it is at God's behest.

The magi are outsiders, foreigners, and yet they are the first to hail the new King of the Jews, incidentally the title that will be written in Greek above Jesus' head on the cross. Guided by astrological portents, these outsiders may be threatening or at least suspicious to the Jews whose scripture prohibits divination. They are people unlike anyone else in Matthew's Gospel, which perhaps should suggest to us that God freely uses people other than those considered 'insiders' to do the will of God. These 'outsiders' set the stage for all that will happen in the rest of Matthew's Gospel. Time and again, Matthew, who is writing to a Jewish audience, will caution his listeners about assuming who is 'in' and who is 'out.' And these 'outsiders' have something to teach the presumed 'insiders.'

The role of the magi is to proclaim that Jesus deserves to be worshipped as the one who ushers in the Kingdom of Heaven. Because they are warned in a dream by angels not to return to Herod, when they leave the baby, Jesus, to return home, they take a different route. And so, their role is also to show us that we cannot come to Jesus and remain unchanged. The world cannot remain the same once the Messiah arrives, in the world, or in our hearts. Epiphany is not the end of Christmas. It is the beginning of the world recognizing that God's redemption has arrived. +