

“Lessons From the Magi”

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Today, we are celebrating Epiphany Sunday -- although technically Epiphany was yesterday, the 12th day of Christmas. Epiphany, which means “appearance” or “manifestation” in Greek, celebrates the appearance of the Son of God among us as fully divine and fully human.

Over the years, the visit of the magi or wise men to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem has become the main focus of the Epiphany celebration. However, in the Eastern Orthodox Church, Epiphany is commemorated with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, instead.

In the United States, Epiphany is not such a big deal except in the US Virgin Islands, where it is an official holiday and all the shops, businesses and government offices are closed. Yet, Epiphany is one of the oldest Christian feasts. We can trace the celebration to the end of the second century, even before the Christmas holiday was established. And, it is still widely celebrated among Christians around the world, especially by Catholics in Europe and Latin American countries, as the 12th day officially marks the end to Christmas celebrations.

There are many different Epiphany celebration traditions around the globe -- whether it is taking down Christmas decorations, singing Christmas carols, baking/eating a special cake, giving gifts to children, or plunging into a river to chase after a cross that has been thrown into it.

But, among these varied traditions, I find this one to be the best: In Ireland, Epiphany is also called “Women’s Christmas.” Traditionally, it is a day when men have to do all the cooking and house chores. It is becoming more popular and many Irish women are said to come together on the Sunday closest to Epiphany to have tea and cakes. Perhaps we can start a similar tradition here!

So, who were the magi, the main characters of Epiphany besides Jesus, the newborn Christ? Here are some things we know about them.

According to the hymn we sang in the beginning of our worship service today, there were three of them. The assumption is based on the number of gifts they brought to Jesus. Tradition tells us that their names were Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. They were said to be from far off lands. One of them was Ethiopian, another was Indian, and the other was Greek. There was also a strong belief that the magi were kings, and this is how they are portrayed in most nativity sets. Thus, Epiphany is often referred to as the day of the Three Kings.

Yet, if you look closely into today’s scripture reading, which is the only passage in the Bible that mentions the magi, you will notice that it does not say anything about their number, their names, their ethnicities, or their identities other than that they were magi, or wise men. Unfortunately, the magi do not appear in the beautiful Christmas narrative in the gospel of Luke; if they had, we probably would have had more details about them. But the only information the gospel of Matthew tells us about the magi is that they came from

the east. They came because they saw a star that they believed to signal the birth of a newborn king of the Israelites.

Though we do not have many details to go by, we can infer that the magi were people of prominent religious, political and financial influence because their arrival stirred up controversy in the city of Jerusalem. It is highly likely that they traveled with a caravan of soldiers and servants, like other people of their high social standing. Another clue of their prominence is this: when they inquired about the newborn king of the Jews, everyone in the city, including the religious leaders and King Herod himself, was greatly disturbed by their inquiry.

Digging a bit more into the context of the ancient world, we know that there were seers, magicians, and astrologers, who studied signs, charted the stars, and interpreted dreams. Kings frequently consulted them because of their deep knowledge and insight. We find reference to these kind of people in the Old Testament books of Daniel and Esther.

Knowing this, we can assume that the magi in Matthew's Christmas story were members of this influential group. Like their fellow astrologers, they were observing the stars and studying their movements to discover signs and meaning in the cosmos. They may have been familiar with Jewish teachings and traditions through the descendants of the Israelites who were displaced east during the Babylonian exile. When the magi saw an unusual star appear in the sky toward Israel, they became convinced that it was a sign of the birth of the Messiah the Jews were awaiting. And so they came to find the newborn king and pay tribute to him.

The story of the magi's visit to Jesus tells us something quite troubling about the religious establishment of the time. King Herod assembled all the chief priests and teachers of the law and asked them where the Christ was to be born. Being experts of the Hebrew scriptures, they replied confidently, "Bethlehem," quoting words of the prophet, Micah. Armed with this knowledge, none of them went to see the Messiah!

Think about it. The Gospel of Luke says that the shepherds immediately went to see the baby Jesus, leaving their flocks in the fields after the chorus of angels announcing his arrival had departed them. The Gospel of Matthew says that the magi, pagan astrologers, journeyed from afar to pay him tribute. And yet, when the religious leaders heard about the birth of the Messiah, they did not act upon this good news. They did not even bother to make the short trip of about 5 miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to discover for themselves the fulfillment of the prophecy that they should have been eagerly awaiting! With their rigorous religious training and study of holy scriptures and sacred traditions, they knew all about the prophecy of the Messiah. When King Herod asked them about the birthplace of the Messiah, they knew the right answer. They probably did not even have to look it up in the scriptures because they had committed them to memory. But, having the right answer did not lead them to do the right thing. Their heads were full of knowledge about the Messiah, but their hearts were not prepared for him.

Friends, here are some insights I draw from the failure of the religious leaders of Jesus' time: Being part of a Christian church community and being familiar with church traditions and customs do not automatically make you become a Christian; Studying the Bible and reading spiritual books do not automatically turn you into a devoted follower of Jesus; Knowing all the right answers to questions of faith does not guarantee

your salvation; and having increased church experience and knowledge does not necessarily mean that you will have a greater worship experience and devotional life. It is important for us to know about Jesus, but what is more important is to encounter and truly worship him.

And, here is something I want our church family to learn from the magi's visit to baby Jesus about our act of worship. When the magi came out of the palace of King Herod, they saw again the star that they had seen in their home country. The scripture says that they were overwhelmed with *joy* when the star rose and stopped at the place the Christ child lay. In Greek, the word for joy that is used literally means "mega" joy. The Message translation puts it this way: "They could hardly contain themselves." And the Living Translation states that, "Their joy knew no bounds!"

These translations remind me of the joy I felt when my grandson, Gabriel was born. I found myself constantly thinking of him. Whenever I was going to see him, it felt like I was going on a date -- back in my 20's, giddy with joy. I would be smiling and singing the whole time I was in the car. One time, just a few weeks after Gabriel was born, I was flying to attend a conference. While we were waiting for departure, suddenly, I had the urge to stand up and shout these words, "Guess what? I am a new grandma!" Well, fear of being kicked out of the plane kept me from doing so. But, I still managed to spread the news to the people seated around me. I just could not contain myself...

Brothers and Sisters, when we worship from the heart, when we worship God out of love, there is joy in our hearts. And this joy is one that cannot be contained. It is written all over our faces and we want to share it with those around us here in this place and everywhere we go.

On this Epiphany Sunday, may we take on the child-like, "mega" joy that inspired the magi to make their long journey from the East to the baby Jesus. I pray that all our worship services this year be full of this joy, which comes from worshiping God from the heart. As we conclude our Christmas celebration on this Epiphany Sunday, may we rejoice, announcing to those around us that God has entered our lives through the birth of Jesus Christ in our hearts. May we go forth expressing a joy that knows no bounds. Amen.