

**“THE GIFTS OF THE MAGI”**

*Matthew 2:1-12*

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

Christians have been delighting in the story of the Three Wise Men—Magi from the East—from the earliest centuries of our faith. Because the story hides as much as it discloses, it leaves a lot of room for interpretation and imagination—and trivia. For instance, it’s commonly noted that Matthew doesn’t say just how many wise men there were. It’s become conventional to say there were three, but that tradition was only established in order to couple each Magi with one of the three gifts. The text also doesn’t say they came and beheld Jesus as an infant in the manger. The manger is only in Luke’s version of Christmas. This traditional fusing of the two Gospels has led to many seminary grads spoiling their mothers’ nativity scenes by pointing out historical inaccuracies.

The text also doesn’t say that these men are kings. They might have been magicians. But it’s more likely that they were astrologers. That they have come to be called “kings” may have to do with the Eastern culture from which they came, where it would have made sense to revere astrologers almost as highly as royalty. What is clear from Matthew is that they were very wise and experienced stargazers. Christians have also given the Magi many names over the years. As Raymond Brown notes, there’s a very old tradition in Eastern Christianity that names them Hormizdah, Yazdegerd, and Perozadh. In case you’re in the market for baby names, the classical names of the wise men in our Western tradition are Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar.<sup>1</sup>

Across the millennia, Christian preachers have made much over the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, preaching of their meanings and significance. You can find beautiful allegories of their moral meanings in sermons ancient and modern. Gregory the Great teaches that the gold represents wisdom, and that “we too offer gold to the newborn king if we shine in his sight with the brightness of the wisdom from on high.” Gregory teaches us to see our prayers as frankincense, by which we “give forth a sweet smell to God by our heavenly desire.” And he teaches us that myrrh is “the spice of self-restraint,” since myrrh—an ancient embalming fluid—prevents our decaying into lives of wickedness.<sup>2</sup>

Luther is more direct:

The gold signifies that Christ is King, since gold is what is customarily given to kings. The frankincense signifies that Christ is Priest, since in the Old Testament only priests were allowed to burn incense. The myrrh signifies that Christ shall die and shall rise from the dead.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Random House, 1993, 1999 [1977]) 198.

<sup>2</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Matthew 1-13*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001) 28-29.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works: Annotations on Matthew, Chapters 1-18* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2015) 15.

But rather than focus only on these specific gifts the Magi bring from their treasure chests, I'd like to propose, on this second day of the Epiphany season, that we consider what epiphanies their encounters in this story give rise to.

As we stand with a wide view of this new year, and as we work in the coming weeks to discern new visions for our life together, I'd like to suggest that the Magi's story offers several other gifts, which we should call epiphanies. They are revelations, or insights, about God that often go overlooked beneath the glimmer of the Magi's treasures. But they are epiphanies that, like the star that first guided them, can also guide us to deeper knowledge of God, and God's dream for us.

The **first epiphany** I see is that God uses creation to reveal God's mission to the Magi. In fact, in the rising star we see creation motioning the Magi towards the "joy of heav'n, to earth come down." We have become accustomed by our modern way of seeing to separate creatures and creation. But here we see a partnership between creation and creatures that results in nothing less than God's love being poured out upon the whole universe. Danté, in his *Divine Comedy*, called this "the love which moves the sun and the other stars."<sup>4</sup>

It seems to me that the Magi's following the star is remarkable not because they noticed a bright star. Anyone can notice a bright star if they look up. What's remarkable is that the epiphany still comes to those who are *used* to looking at stars, to those whose whole life is given to studying bright stars. Others would have seen this star and not been moved to respond to its leading, thinking it was only as remarkable as any other bright star. But the expert stargazers know something special when they see it, because they've learned the difference between a bright, guiding star, and one that merely twinkles.

Consider the example of one of the most extraordinary scientific discoveries of 2017. On August 17, scientists were able not only to see a collision of neutron stars, but hear the collision through a recording of gravitational ripples in space-time. In layman's terms, it has been compared to going from seeing space as a silent film from the 1920s, to seeing it in 3-D in an IMAX theater. Researchers call this ability "multi-messenger astronomy." They say it's like "gaining a new sense of perception."<sup>5</sup> This is what epiphanies do. The love that moves the sun and the stars breaks through to us, and helps us to see life sparkle and crackle in new ways.

This past Wednesday night, we were in the Chapel for a Service of Epiphany, led by Tommy Bratton, who brought to us gifts called "star gifts." At the end of the service, everyone passed a basket and was invited to take a star. On each star was a different word. The word was to be a gift to the recipient. We could place it somewhere where we would see it throughout our day, and at least once a day. The purpose is that throughout the year we will begin to see what is likely a familiar word in new ways. Everyone got a different word. My word was "truth." Now this struck me in a new way, because if you come into my office, there is a little picture that I've place on the doorway over the light switch. It's a picture that I took outside the library at a

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<sup>4</sup> Danté Alighieri, *Paradiso*, XXXIII lines 142-45.

<sup>5</sup> Calla Colfield, "The Greatest Space Science Stories of 2017," article published on Space.com (21 Dec 2017), accessed at <https://www.space.com/39109-greatest-space-science-stories-2017.html>.

seminary in Washington, DC, with a quote by its main entrance. The quote reads, “THE TRUTH, COME WHENCE IT MAY, COSTS WHAT IT WILL.” And, because I see this every day, I was curious as to how to receive the star gift with the word “truth” on it. Since I already have “truth” in my office, I began to wonder if God was leading me to take this new “truth” home, so that I can begin to see truth in new ways, not only in my work, but in my home, in my family, in my neighborhood, in ways that I haven’t thought about before. Now I am called to see truth not only in 2-D, but in 3-D.

Incidentally, when neutron stars collide, one of the materials that they create is gold - just an interesting fact.

The **second epiphany** is that God bends the plans of the wicked back toward God’s mission, so that God’s salvation plot is not compromised. While Herod is trying to be clever, and to discern the place of Jesus’ birth with the help of the chief priests and scribes, he inadvertently sends the Magi straight to the place God wants them to go. Remember, it is not a forgone conclusion that the Magi will find Jesus without this final tip. Coming from the East, the Magi would have come first upon Jerusalem, the capital city, where they expected to find a newborn king. But upon Herod’s new directions they walk out of Herod’s court to see the star is still guiding them.

Now, Herod is the King of the Jews. But who is this new child, who claims to be King of the Jews? Herod is afraid that his power is going to be taken away from him, and that his position will be taken away from him, so he is plotting, he’s afraid, he’s anxious, and through his plotting, he actually has the effect of sending the Magi directly to witness the birth of the Christ child. And eventually, these Magi make their way back home to share this good news, *with the other half of the world!* Even in spite of Herod’s plotting, even in spite of his wickedness, God’s Salvation plot continues.

Herod would die soon after, and his son would take over – Herod Antipas. There’s a story of Jesus acting indirectly with Herod Antipas later in the gospel of Luke. The Pharisees come to him and say, “Hey, did you know Herod is trying to kill you? You have got to get out of here.” But Jesus responds, “You go tell that fox that I’m working here, healing and curing people, and I will finish my job, and on the third day, you will know that I have finished.”

No Herod, no ruler, no one who plots and conceives the demise of God’s salvation’s story, will have their wishes met, in the end. God’s story will continue. So, in this New Year, my hope is that we will not have any fear of the “Herods” in our lives, but always know with confidence—to let our incense rise like confidence to God, a confidence in God’s story—that God is working in and through us, even in spite of those who would have it the otherwise.

The **third, and final, epiphany** that I see in this text is this: God provides another path, when it seems the one that we have been walking on this whole time has been closed to us. When the Wise men are gathered to Herod, he calls them to him, in secret, and tries to plot against the birth of Jesus, I believe they began to get a bad feeling from him. To be sure, they followed his instructions. But I believe that they got a strange feeling about him—as we do when we get around someone who just doesn’t have our best interest in mind. It’s a way of facial expression, a tone of voice, something in the way they’re talking to us – the way they are acting around us

makes us suspicious. I believe this is what happens to the Magi. This is what gives rise to their dream in which they're warned to go home by another road.

And I believe there is a very similar story that has been developing for decades now for the church. There is a narrative about church in our time that goes something like this, "The church in the West used to be thriving. The church in the West used to be powerful, and now those days are done, and the church has been diminished, along with its powerful witness, and the church's future is in doubt."

I would like to counter that narrative with the following narrative: "That 'yes' we have been on one path, in our mission toward following the star. And the world has changed around us. But God has arranged a new path for God's people to continue delivering the good news – no matter what!"

In almost every action movie, you come to a place near the end, where it looks like the "good guys" are trapped, and there's no way out. And I believe that if we turn the story of the Magi into a movie, there would be this scene, where they're cornered in the end, and all of a sudden, they find this new way out.

Let the movie scene be the same for us. Let the "official" narrative that the church is being diminished come to an end. I know that there are some churches that are closing their doors. There are other churches that are finding their stories coming to an end, but that does not have to be so for every church. God reveals new missions to God's people all the time, and I believe that in this New Year, that God has epiphanies, and revelation, and new paths opening for us, if we have the eyes to see.

So, as we follow the star into this New Year, may we begin to see what has been in 2-D, now flashing out before us in 3 dimensions, and even four dimensions. May we begin to see creation and creature, together, begin to crackle and sparkle and light up in new and fresh ways. May we, like the poet, Danté, remember the good news: that "the same love that moves the sun and the other stars" also moves us.

...This is the Love of God, who fulfills promises, just like the one made to us and our ancestors, that "you will be as numerous as the stars in the sky..."

Amen.

