



“The Ultimate Seekers”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***January 10, 2010
Matt. 2:1-12 (NRSV)***

Today we observe the Feast of Epiphany, which falls on January 6 every year. This Christian holiday is known by a variety of names, including “Twelfth Night” and “Three Kings Day.” These alternate titles refer to the fact that Epiphany falls twelve days after Christmas, and that this celebration commemorates the visitation of the magi, who are sometimes referred to as the “three kings.”

The way that Christians celebrate Epiphany varies depending upon cultural identity. In England, for example, three cakes (one for each king) are baked and shared among revelers. Before the cakes are put in the oven, the baker secretly stirs a dried bean into one of the three cake pans. Whoever finds the bean in her or his slice of cake receives a special prize.

Many Latin American cultures celebrate “Three Kings Day” with church and family gatherings, where special food is served, gifts are given, games are played, and a piñata is broken.

Filipino Christians focus on the meaning of Jesus’ birth during Epiphany. Filipino Roman Catholics, in particular, celebrate the Feast of the Santo Niño (the Feast of the Holy Baby Jesus) during this season.

Some years ago when I was on a mission trip with college students from my church in Boston, we were blessed to participate in a Santo Niño festival in Cebu City. The celebration included a huge parade, street fairs, party music, face painting, and street revelry that seemed like a cross between the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena and Carnival in Rio de Janeiro! The face paint, in particular, got a little wild. I have a great photo of our kids covered in grease paint and looking like surreal Native Americans ready to go on the war path.

In Germany, children go from house to house on Epiphany eve, singing carols and chalking the year and initials KMB (Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar) near the entrance of each home. The festive *Dreikonigskuchen* or Three Kings Cake is also served on Epiphany eve to celebrate this occasion.

Most of the rest of Northern Europe downplays the magi stories during Epiphany in favor of stories about Jesus' baptism. In these churches, infants and believers are baptized on the Feast of Epiphany, and congregants are invited to renew their baptisms. That renewal invitation often comes with a sprinkling of water for the entire congregation by the priest or pastor as she moves about the sanctuary shouting, "Renew your baptism!"

No matter how we celebrate Epiphany, the theme common to all Christian cultures is the belief that God is revealed in the person and work of Christ.

In Matthew's gospel, that revelation—that epiphany—is experienced by the magi, and in the other gospels, it is revealed in the baptism of Jesus when the voice of God pronounces, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

II

Regardless of our particular religious and ethnic heritages, when we return to the scripture, particularly to Matthew 2:1-12, and give the story of the magi a close read, we see that the Epiphany story in our minds and our cultures is an embellishment of the story that we find in the gospel.

There is, for example, no stable, no shepherds and no sheep in Matthew's Christmas pageant. There is, however, a house that is visited by an undetermined number of wise men who bring strange gifts that only a first century king would value, especially the frankincense and myrrh.

The Christmas and Epiphany stories that exist in our consciousness and cultures are a conflation of Luke's and Matthew's stories about the birth of Christ, the Old Testament prophecies such as the reading from Isaiah 60 featured in today's Call to Worship, and a series of folk traditions and carols passed down for hundreds—and in some cases—thousands of years.

"So where did the three kings come from?" we may ask.

The idea in our minds that there were three Eastern royals traveling to Bethlehem comes to us from the lyrics of the carol, "We Three Kings," that we just sang.

And where did the composer of the carol get the kings?

New Testament scholar Douglas R. A. Hare explains in his commentary on Matthew that the number of magi (i.e., three) was extrapolated from the number of gifts described in today's gospel reading.¹

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* in "Interpretation: A Bible Commentary," (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1993) p. 13. C.f., Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 16.

Eventually, through folk traditions, the three gift-givers were ascribed royal identities, most likely as a result of Jesus' birth narrative being seen as the answer to Old Testament prophecies such as: Isaiah 60:3,² Ps. 72:10-11,³ and Philemon 2:10-11⁴ that make reference to all nations bowing to the Messiah. A similar reference is repeated in Matthew's gospel, which identifies Jesus as messiah for Israel and for all nations.

The wordsmiths among us will appreciate that the Greek term for the visitors at the manger, which is *magoi*, may be translated into English in a variety of ways including the following: "wise men," "astrologers," and "magicians."⁵

Most theologians accept "astrologers" as the best translation, and base their views on historical data from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which reveals that astrology originated in Persia or Babylonia and India, and that Eastern astrologers were proto-astronomers, who studied the stars and who created, read, and interpreted star charts.⁶

This is why, if you were here and paying attention on Christmas Eve, we had Russell Cowick dressed as an astrologer—a proto scientist—using a makeshift telescope to peer at the Star of Bethlehem. (If you were elsewhere on Christmas Eve, you can see the Star of Bethlehem—aka "the star piñata"—hanging in OH today.)

While many historians debate the identity and historicity of the magi, most biblical scholars view the magi as Gentiles, whose identities in Matthew's gospel served as a literary and theological device indicating that Jesus had a Gentile following from birth.⁷ In other words, he was more than a Jewish prophet; he had international appeal. He was King of Kings. He came for every person and nation.

Theologian Douglas Hare explains in his book on Matthew's gospel that the names and geographic origins of the magi were embellished over time through folk traditions, until eventually each royal visitor acquired a specific name and origin: Melchior, King of Persia; Gaspar, King of India; and Balthazar, King of Arabia.⁸

In a manner similar to the three visitors' identities, the three gifts acquired increasingly new layers of meaning over time—meaning which had theological significance. The royal gifts included gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were strange gifts by present-day standards, but they were precious gifts by ancient standards, and considered symbols of wealth and religious and political power.⁹

²"And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

³"May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, p. 16. Biblical quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁴ Phil. 2:10-11. "...every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

⁵ M. Eugene Boring, "Commentary on Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 140.

⁶ Boring and Craddock, p. 16.

⁷ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* (New York: Harper One, 2007), p. 144.

⁸ Hare, p. 13.

⁹ Hare, p. 14.

Gold, as in every generation, was a luxury and a measure of wealth.

Myrrh was bitter, perfumed oil used as incense by Temple priests, and for the healing and anointing of sick and penitent persons. It was also an expensive burial spice,¹⁰ which in the context of Jesus' birth narrative foreshadows his crucifixion and death.¹¹ The doom and gloom to which myrrh alludes is spelled out in the fourth verse of "We Three Kings."

The third gift was frankincense, a precious, fragrant resin harvested from rare trees grown in the Middle East, and used only in the sanctuary by the high priests. This gift symbolized Jesus' role as a High Priest in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹²

Regardless of which identity we associate with the magi (wise men, royalty, or astrologers), or how much significance we associate with the gifts that the magi brought, the unifying themes of the Epiphany narratives, which are shared across cultures and time are these:

- 1) The Eastern travelers followed a magnificent star to a mendicant's birth.
- 2) They brought the baby gifts fit for a king.
- 3) Along the way, they encountered a tyrant who sought the demise of the baby Jesus.
- 4) And, having been warned in a dream to return home by a different route, they were spared Herod's wrath and foiled his evil plot.

III

Given the numerous cultural and literary interpretations associated with the Epiphany story and the effort needed to understand and interpret it, it would be easy to miss the meaning of the magi's visit to the manger. So despite how interesting the details of the story may be, I invite us to take a step back from the fine points, and attend to the larger themes and insights inherent in the passage, and dare to enter into the sense of wonder and awe exhibited by the magi.

Despite the fact that the identity of the magi is illusive, and that those who like their facts nailed down will likely dismiss their story as a foreign fable, those who know that Truth is more than the product of a math equation, or the result of a laboratory test, may find ourselves receiving new and wonderful gifts from this ancient story and its peculiar pilgrims. These gifts may be the return of a sense of wonder and awe in our lives.

The magi direct our attention skyward. They rekindle our interest in the stars. They encourage us to ponder new possibilities. They invite us to befriend the unknown, and

¹⁰ In John's account of Holy Week, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

¹¹ Hare, p. 14.

¹² Hare, p. 14.

to trust that God is still speaking. They prod us to ask questions like “Why?” They point us in new directions, and invite us to blaze new trails that others may follow.

If the magi would come in our time, they might be wearing the garb of religious pilgrims, non-governmental advisors to the United Nations, or physical cosmologists. They might be intellectuals on a spiritual quest, who incur jabs from their peers who say that “God is dead” and religion is “the opiate of the people.” They might be scientists and philosophers who press the limits of human knowing, trusting that God is still speaking—through the arts, intellectual inquiry, and human experience. In short, the magi might be us.

These modern magi are the ultimate seekers. They look for signs and wonders. They dare to think outside the box. They journey outside their home cultures, and bravely go where no man or woman has gone.

These seekers provoke others to become seekers too. They remember and remind others that we are all on a journey, that there is merit in pondering the meaning of signs and wonders, and that new truth can burst forth in unlikely places and among peculiar people.

These ancient and modern magi teach others that we all bear gifts, that we are all capable of discovering new truths, and that it is possible to be transformed by the Christmas message and move on forever changed, forever agents of change—revealing for others that God has yet more light and truth to break forth.

The ancient magi remind us that we have an archetypal quest in common with people from every time and place. We share a sense of yearning and wonder. We can learn from and support each other on the journey. We can cultivate curiosity in our children, and invite others to explore new alternatives when faced by seemingly insurmountable problems.

This is what the Epiphany story is all about. It is about the big themes, and not the small points. It's about a timeless invitation to become seekers, about looking for and paying attention to signs and wonders, and about being on a journey with one another, bearing gifts, and gaining insight.

Epiphany is about us exploring and discerning deeper truths, making mindful, faithful choices about the paths we travel, and about living into the hope that God holds for all of us.

This is Epiphany. This is what the feast is about. Let the party begin! Amen.