

---

How do we recognize God in our midst?  
Martin Grove United Church  
January 6, 2019  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

The first few services after Christmas sometimes feel like a let-down. We've just been through our busy season. We had carol singing before services during Advent, but that's over now. We had our Advent groups, long gone now. Our Christmas Eve service is the one service every year (other than funerals) at which we get our highest attendance. It's "the big show". Today is - just us. If Christmas Eve is like watching the final game of the World Series, then today's service is like sitting on a broken park bench on a dreary day watching some non-motivated people play catch - badly. Right? But on the plus side, Christmas includes a lot of hype and chaos. By today we have returned to normal life, and that's not all bad either.

Today is called "Epiphany Sunday", but it actually kicks off a whole season - called the season of Epiphany, which will take us all the way to Ash Wednesday and Lent. In general, the word "epiphany" means recognition of an important truth. And in the church, the word "Epiphany" refers to different people recognizing Jesus as the son of God. By tradition, that recognition happened in 3 phases. The first phase is the baptism of Jesus (which we celebrate next week). It is considered an epiphany because during his baptism, the spirit descends on Jesus and announces that Jesus is the son of God. That story has been celebrated since the early days of the church. By the 3rd or 4th century, Epiphany came to include the story of the magi (which we read today), who similarly announce that Jesus is the son of God. And during the middle ages, Epiphany was expanded again to include the story of Jesus turning water into wine (which we get to in two weeks), because that was a demonstration that Jesus was the son of God.

Today we celebrate the story of the magi. In an effort to understand the story, let's start by considering what we know about the magi, and where that information comes from. You probably think the story comes from the Bible, so let's start there. "The magi" actually have many different titles:

- 
- New International Version: “Magi from the east”. (footnote says traditionally, wise men.)
  - The Message: “a band of scholars”
  - Revised Standard: “wise men from the east”.
  - Good News: “some men who studied the stars came from the east”.
  - Living Bible: “some astrologers from eastern lands”
  - The Voice: “magi, wise men or seers from the east”

We have other sources of course. From the song “We Three Kings” we get the impression that the men in question were kings, and that there were 3 of them. Nothing in Matthew suggests that they were kings. The reformer John Calvin was vehemently opposed to referring to the Magi as kings. He once wrote: “But the most ridiculous contrivance of the Papists on this subject is, that those men were kings ... Beyond all doubt, they have been stupefied by a righteous judgment of God, that all might laugh at [their] gross ignorance.” Calvin was upset with the church for creating that branch of the story. As far as I can figure out, by the 3rd century the magi began to be considered as kings. By the 6th century they had names: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gasper. And a 14th century Armenian tradition connected those kings with places: Balthasar being declared the King of Arabia, Melchior the King of Persia, and Gasper the King of India. The whole idea of the magi being kings comes from Church history.

“Magi” was the Persian name given to the hereditary priesthood of the Medes, what today we would call Kurds. The word is connected with paying attention to the stars, the occult, and the modern word, “magic”. “First-century naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote several chapters about the Magi wherein they sound more like something from a Harry Potter novel. He details their skill in magic arts - including pouring boiled earthworms in the ear to cure a toothache!”<sup>1</sup>

So who were these guys? kings? magicians? astrologers? wise men (whatever that means)? And we have no idea how many there were. In the Bible, it doesn’t say how many men there are, just that there are 3 gifts. Our tradition is therefore to imagine that there were 3 men, while Orthodox traditions usually imagine 12 of them. It’s almost

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2016/december/magi-wise-men-or-kings-its-complicated.html>

---

as if the story was simply made up. And speaking of imagination, how do we imagine this story at all in a way that is meaningful to us today?

Some scholars think the stories was simply a way to have non-Jewish people recognize the significance of Jesus. That's certainly a possibility. Some scholars connect the gifts themselves with deeper meanings for Jesus:

- gold -> king
- frankincense -> priestly duties
- myrrh -> embalming ointment for death.

The story of the magi clearly creates more questions than it answers. The obvious question - which I'm sure is already in the minds of George and Liz, is simply - what happened to the money?? There are no clues given.

But perhaps the most interesting question is this - why is Matthew telling this story at all? As we know, the Gospel of Matthew was written to an exclusively Jewish audience. Matthew is the one gospel where the author constantly points back to something in the Old Testament and says, "see, Jesus did that". For example, later on in the nativity story, the author says that Mary, Joseph and Jesus run away to Egypt while Herod was killing infants, and then Matthew says, "This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son'." (Matthew 2:15b (NRSV)). Which is an allusion to words found in Hosea 11:1. And a bit later, when the family was coming back from Egypt, "But when Joseph heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, Joseph was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'" (Matthew 2:22-23 (NRSV)). Matthew actually contains about 40 of these "back-references" to affirm the idea that Jesus was the awaited messiah.

These references are not intended to be seen as proofs of Jesus's special status. They are all very incidental elements in the whole Jesus story. They are not given to prove to a non-believer that Jesus was the son of God. They are given to affirm that Jesus was the son of God to people who already believed that for other reasons. Matthew's

---

audience was not really “Jewish people”. Matthew’s audience was Jewish people who already believed that Jesus was their messiah.

So again, why did Matthew tell this story? If you were alive 2000 years ago, is the story of the magi already known to you, perhaps in a slightly different form? Does it sound familiar? Does it sound like other stories in the Old Testament? Is the magi story perhaps a re-telling of a theme that runs throughout the Old Testament? The answer is of course, yes. The key elements of the story of the magi appears in at least 2 if not 4 other places in the Old Testament.

In Genesis, for example, we have the story of Joseph. Joseph, in the story, was sold by his brothers into slavery, and eventually came to work for the Pharaoh of Egypt. And then, Pharaoh had a series of dreams about 7 fat cows, 7 skinny cows, 7 ears of grain, etc. And Pharaoh called for all the wise men and magicians in Egypt to interpret the dreams for him, and they all failed. So Pharaoh asked Joseph, who did interpret the dreams (which were about 7 years of abundance followed by 7 years of famine). So Pharaoh promoted Joseph to his second-in-command and “Pharaoh had Joseph ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, ‘Bow the knee!’ Thus Pharaoh set Joseph over all the land of Egypt.” (Genesis 41:43 (NRSV)). So in that story too, we have magi bowing to Joseph, Joseph being seen as the saviour of the Hebrew people at that time because the whole Joseph story is about Joseph saving the Hebrew people from starvation and therefore from extinction.

An even more direct analog to the magi story is found in 1 Kings 10, where the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon. She came to Jerusalem with a caravan - camels carrying spices, gold, and precious stones, which she gave to Solomon because she was so impressed with his wisdom. This is why the lectionary includes the reading from Isaiah 60 this morning, “the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” And from our Psalm this morning too, “may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.”<sup>2</sup> Sounds a lot

---

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 72:10b-11. (NRSV)

---

like the magi giving gifts to Jesus and bowing down before him. And if you are not willing to make the connection between Jesus and Solomon yourself, Matthew makes the connection himself in chapter 12, referring to Jesus, Matthew said, “see, something greater than Solomon is here!” (Matthew 12:42c (NRSV)).

The story of the magi would have been familiar to Matthew’s audience, because it simply continues a theme that runs through the Old Testament that all nations will bow down to the Hebrew people, a story that happened with Moses, with Joseph, with Solomon, with Daniel, and according to Matthew, with Jesus.

But back to the Epiphany of Jesus. Do you know that there are only 2 places to look for God in our midst? One place we might look for God is in the past. The other place we might look for God is in the present. I’m actually not playing word games here. For example, many Jewish festivals are about remembering what God did for the Hebrew people in the past, like the celebration of passover and the whole flight from Egypt story. If you have every attended a passover meal, the liturgy that goes with the meal is all about remembering what God did for the people in the past. And that’s fine.

But traditionally, the Christian view has been to look for God in the present. Not that the past doesn’t matter of course, but God is still present, so we expect to have regular, ongoing, interactions with God. Traditionally, Christians are not happy to reflect that God did something great thousands of years, ago, it’s more of “what have you experienced of God lately?” So it really doesn’t matter if you believe literally in the story of the magi or not. Because what matters is what we ourselves experience today. Now.

So today is Epiphany. Traditionally seen as a celebration of when other people recognized Jesus as God in their midst. But let’s just update that to the present and say that Ephiphany in 2019 is about people like us - not special people - recognizing God in our midst today. And how do we do that? I will simply suggest that might be a great project for this year. For us as individuals and for us as a congregation.

The searching is now officially started!

*Amen.*