

Epiphany 2024 - COTM
The Rev. Emily E. Given

(Note: This is a set of sermon notes and not a formal manuscript.)

When we placed the Magi in the nativity scene during the early service on Christmas Eve, I asked the children how long they thought it took for the Magi to make their way to Jesus. Some thought just a few days... others thought a few weeks... still others were a little braver when they estimated a few months. All of them were surprised when I revealed Jesus was most likely the age of a preschooler by the time the Magi arrived with their gifts and praise. That is a helpful bit of information to consider when we are quick to put our Christmas decorations away because "Christmas is over". The adoration of Jesus as the one they have been waiting for was not just an action-packed weekend in Bethlehem, it was the beginning of a longer view of the "Word made flesh" who changed the world.

I prefer the term Magi over "wise men" for two reasons. One, because honestly, we don't know if they were all men... and two, the word is more descriptive of who we know them to be. Magi locates them in Persia (the East) and names their role as priests, scholars, and scientists. Some definitions called them "sorcerers." To us, that might give the connotations of witchcraft or magic but a truer definition was one who knew how to interact with the elemental world and knew how to read the stars. Not to blow up the image impressed upon many of us as children but we don't even know if there were really three. Three gifts, yes. But three people, we don't really know.

And what about these gifts? They seem strange gifts for a child. Have any of you ever wondered further than that? At first glance, they were gifts of great value. Those gifts had the power to communicate devotion to this new king and (on a practical level) change the financial reality of the young couple. (Babies are expensive, ya'll!)

But that is not what makes them so significant. At a closer look, the Magi were proclaiming who they knew the Savior to be. The gifts were emblematic of the aspects of how Jesus would live out his life and ministry.

Gold feels like an obvious gift. It represents Jesus' kingship and a foretelling of him being called "King of the Jews". The Magi recognized that Jesus' kingship surpasses any earthly ruler. One who protects and rules over us with loving kindness and holy justice.

Frankincense is a sticky resin from a tree, and when dried it is used for worship. The smoke from the resin is a way of lifting our prayer to God with several of our senses. This

gift recognized Jesus' godliness and role as our great high priest. One who should be worshiped.

Myrrh is an oil that was used in the embalming or burial process. It is also known for its healing properties so this gift speaks of both Jesus as a healer and Jesus as one who will die. One who will offer himself as a sacrifice and calls us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices.

We are familiar with gold but if you are curious, I have some Frankincense and Myrrh here today on a table in the back so feel free to you can check them out.

The visit of the Magi is one of those stories that is always included in Children's Bibles. Most times, they are dressed in finery, riding on camels, and head off once they offer their gifts and worship to Jesus. If we leave the story there, we miss an essential part. This arrival of one who is king, priest, and savior all at once was good news for the world but REALLY bad news for those who were seeking earthly power. King Herod was afraid. So afraid that he plotted to use others to find this rumored King who was threatening his reign. When spending time with the scripture this week, I noticed something for the very first time. Matthew's Gospel noted that it wasn't just Herod who was frightened, it was all of Jerusalem with Herod. By drawing attention to this, the story of Jesus' life has an added dimension. Jesus from the very beginning was a disruptor. Keeping this in mind helps us when we see him in his adult life. Jesus experienced disbelief from some who listened to his message. How he brought turbulence to the social order, political hierarchy, and religious landscape.

And how his life inspired agency and resistance from others. It was true of the Marys in our Advent stories and it is also true of the Magi today. In a dream they were told, to go home a different way. Do not be a party to the hands that want to take Jesus down. Honor this child you came to worship by protecting him from Herod and the others who were responding out of fear and self-preservation. The bravery and the faithfulness of the Magi are also a model for us. Let the knowledge of Jesus as king, priest, and savior make you brave and inspire your faithfulness.

The readings and prayers today play with the images of light and darkness. They call us to make a choice to move toward the Light. "Arise, shine for your light has come" the prophet Isaiah proclaimed to those who experienced living in Babylonian exile. If they could "arise and shine", then certainly we can consider how we might join them in the holy act of turning toward the light too. Actively resisting the darkness around us.

A few years ago, a friend sent a group text message out to our circle of friends on the Feast of the Epiphany, offering a way to stay connected to one another in the new year. We were instructed to text back “yes” if we wanted to be given a “star word” to guide our prayers and meditation for the year. I responded back “yes” and received the word “Balance” It was the perfect word for me in that season as a person who was working full-time, going to seminary half-time, parenting two humans, and trying to have some semblance of a life outside of those calls to ministry. I use the word as a breath prayer, mantra, newfound personal slogan, and barometer of how I was doing during my time in spiritual direction. It was fun to watch the words populate the group text as others responded back with their “yesses”. I kept that text chain and used it as a way to pray for all my friends in light of the star word they had been given.

What I loved most about it was the star word was like an “anti-new year’s resolution. It was not about being better or being more. It was about being mindful and receiving the gift. A star to follow like that of the Magi. A guiding light that brings us closer to the one who created us, redeemed us... and who journeys with us still.

So I want to offer that same gift to this circle of friends. On the way out, if you would like a “star word” I will give one to you on a slip of paper. May it guide you into a path of mindfulness of the love and grace that Jesus has for each of us and how that can be lived out here in community.

We have options on how to use them. Each word can be treated like a secret, sacred message between just you and Jesus... or you might feel called to share your word with others so they can walk with you along the experience of letting the words guide us. The choice is yours. Just like prayer, there really isn’t a wrong way to do it. Post it on the fridge. Use it as a bookmark. Keep it somewhere that it will serve as your star, your, light, your way to “arise and shine” because our light HAS come. And the glory of the Lord has risen upon us. Amen.