

## *The Star of Joy*

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Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany Sunday

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Look at any nativity collection, any crèche, and you will see them right there. There are the 3 wise men, right along side the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the sheep, and the baby Jesus.

The Wise Men are always a part of the Christmas pageants seen in churches and school plays. The Wise Men are a part of Christmas, aren't they?

Well, yes they are, when we understand that the Christmas season actually begins on Christmas Eve and lasts for 12 days (hence the song the 12 Days of Christmas) until the feast of Epiphany, which is always 12 days after Christmas.

In many parts of the world, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas, with rituals of gift giving tied to the treasure-bearing wise men instead of a jolly fat man in a red suit.

The word epiphany generally means an appearance of the Divine. It represents Christ's revelation to the Gentiles, and in fact to the entire world. Epiphany reveals to us that Jesus Christ—even in his infancy—came for all humanity, not just a chosen few.

Let's look a little closer at the wise men and some of their motivations behind their visit to the Christ child and I think we will be able to see a little clearer why Epiphany does mean these things I have just said.

The word magi, from which we get our English "magic" is used negatively and judgmentally in the remainder of the New Testament, but not so much here. Magi, as it is used in this text, refers not so much to magicians as to astrologers who studied the heavens for signs of significant events. The magi probably came from Babylon, the seat of ancient astronomical studies.

There is nothing in the text we read that indicated that these men were actually kings, and Matthew never states that there were 3 of them. But, since Matthew mentions there were 3 gifts, it is assumed there were three men.

There are other characters in this story, as well—primarily, Herod and secondarily, the chief priests and scribes. When the wise men come to Jerusalem (a hint that they probably were *not* Jews or they would know that the Christ child was not born in Jerusalem), the first thing we hear them asking is where is this "king of the Jews?" "We have come to pay him homage."

Well, you know this must've ruffled some feathers with ole King Herod—HE was the king, and to have another who was called king of the Jews just set him off! So, acting just like a roach scurrying for a dark corner in which to hide when the lights come on, Herod himself starts plotting out a way to get rid of this new king that is threatening *his* power and his control over the kingdom.

He begins his plot by inviting the Magi to a *secret* meeting. You and I both know that nothing good ever comes out of secret meetings. They just have a rather negative connotation, don't they? What is it that he is hiding? Why does it have to be secret? What is he afraid of that someone else might find out about?

Now, I want you to think about how you have felt when you have experienced something in your life that you just **knew** in your heart was right and good. It was that moment when everything just seemed to line up for you. The doors were opened and the way may clear. You felt alive in your own skin. "This is me," you said to yourself, "this is why I am alive, *this* is why God created me!" And you were right! Those moments are the moments God wishes for us all.

Now think about a time you may have been summoned to a secret meeting. Those same warm, fuzzy feelings don't emerge, do they?

I imagine the huge contrasts in feelings were not lost on the magi, either. One is a feeling of fear and anxiety, a feeling of apprehension. The other is a feeling of joy. One feels so right, and the other feels so wrong.

Both the magi and Herod were seeking something, weren't they? They were all on a journey, searching for something more than they had. Herod was looking to retain his power, his status. His journey never really took him outside himself, though. His journey was all about him. **He** was the focal point of his life; his status and power were the destination for his journey. "Put yourself first—no one else will put you first," he must've said to himself. His drive and motivation was powered by self-preservation.

The magi, though, were searching for meaning, a substance outside of themselves. They were seeking the One who made life meaningful.

Maybe you are one of those that have tried Herod's approach before and noticed it really got you nowhere. You tried to find meaning within yourself and ended up lonely and empty. Maybe you have tried to figure it all out and it has left you cold and full of questions.

Herod ended up feeling fearful and anxious. The magi, though, when they followed the star and found the Christ Child, were overwhelmed with joy, because they realized, they recognized they were in the place where they were meant to be. They had arrived at the place where the divine and the human meet.

I believe we all have a bit of conflict going on within us all the time. We are conflicted between anticipation of what could be, and fear—a

digging in of our heels; not wanting to go forward into the unknown; of staying stuck where we are or trusting in Christ to move us spiritually forward.

We all have within us that inner self that joyfully accepts Jesus Christ and all his promises. We also each have a darker inner self that wants to reject the rule of someone else and do it *our* way.

I believe Herod still lives today in anyone and anything that moves us away from the joy God wants us to have.

The magi must have been very fearful of disobeying Herod when they decided not to return to Jerusalem and tell the king where Jesus was. But they listened to their dream. Dreams, you know, are really just another God-given inner voice we all have. The magi listened to their dream and said "no" to their fear and chose life and spiritual growth and joy.

God gave the magi the gift of the star to lead them to their joy, to the Truth. God gave them that gift for them to question their own meaning.

What gift does God send you today? What is your star? By what light do you see God? What is your star that leads you to a deeper meaning of life outside yourself? Is it in a tragedy in your life, in a friend, a book or a song? We receive these gifts every day—we just have to be aware of them, as the magi were of the star.

The magi still are bringing gifts. They bring us the gift today of their example. They give us the wonderful example of how they said "NO" to Herod and his deceptive ways, and "YES" to Jesus. They said "NO" to fear and "YES" to Christ.

This New Year, I encourage each of you to discover, or notice what your star is. Is it a star of joy or a dark room in which to hold a secret meeting of fear? Do epiphanies still happen today—that place where the human and divine meet, or are they just stories that always begin with "once upon a time?"

Say no to fear and yes to joy and your life can have a substance of meaning only found in Jesus Christ. Amen.