

Year B, Epiphany  
Isaiah 61:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14  
Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12  
St. Catherine's Episcopal Church

“Epiphany.” An appearance or manifestation. That’s what happened for the Magi when they followed a star to a tiny hamlet named Bethlehem. In wonder and awe, they kneel before the Child and his mother.

Did you notice something about our reading from Matthew’s Gospel today? Nothing is said about there being three of them, they weren’t kings, they didn’t have camels, and we don’t know that they were men. When we hear the stories of Jesus’ early life, it’s almost impossible to look at a text apart from what we think we know about it. For most of us, the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are entwined with one another and their Hebrew scripture roots. In Matthew, the Magi come to a house in Bethlehem; there is no manger, no shepherds, and no heavenly host.

You do know what would have happened if it had been three wise women instead of men who showed up? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought disposable diapers as gifts!

The gifts the magi brought, Matthew tells us, were gold, frankincense and myrrh. These were all highly prized commodities in the Roman world. Gold, we can relate to. Frankincense and myrrh? Both are resins obtained from the sap of trees growing in the Middle East. The aroma of frankincense is said to represent life. The Judaic, Christian and Islamic faiths have often used frankincense mixed with oils to anoint newborn infants and people moving into a new phase in their spiritual lives. It was also used in perfume and lavishly used as incense in religious rites. As the Epiphany carol we sang continues, “Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom.” Myrrh was used as a constituent of perfume and incense, but was chiefly used for embalming. In Ancient Rome myrrh was priced at five times as much as frankincense, and was worth more than its weight in gold.

Luke and the other two evangelists don’t mention wise men or stars or presents, but Matthew chooses to include this story in his Gospel. There’s a power to this story. Its message permeates Matthew’s account of Jesus ministry. Jesus didn’t come just for the Jews, the chosen people. He came for the Gentiles, for all of us. This was a bitter lesson for early believers, who at first were all Jewish and who knew that they were the elect of God. They were shocked by the idea that impure Gentiles were, from God’s perspective, on equal footing with them. This is Paul’s point in our epistle. His ministry, he writes, is “for the sake of the Gentiles,” a radical thought for first century Jews. The Magi symbolize the divine promise given to Abraham for “all peoples on earth.” The new king Jesus abolishes not only the barriers of nation, race and ethnicity. He also transcends the boundaries of gender, religion, economics and social stratification, for in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are one in Christ Jesus”—the Magi are only the tip of a very big iceberg.

The story of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew allowed the Jewish followers of Jesus to imagine the unthinkable—God’s grace extending to the outsiders, the gentiles. Who are the outsiders in our world? Can we imagine the favor of God extending beyond the human boundaries of race, class, nationality, ethnicity, religious devotion, gender and sexual orientation? The Epiphany story portrays people on a journey in search of the truth and a glimpse of the divine, people seeking God with a sincere heart. If we recast the story of the Magi, who will play these seekers of the divine? Consider the possibilities: those without power or wealth, young people, women...

Katerina Whitley says of this, “We don’t know what occurred when the Magi, princes from the East, stepped into a humble home in Bethlehem. We can only guess. We only know that something remarkable happened that day when the far east and near east came together. But the gift to us is that the visit of the magi reveals something else that has as much meaning for our lives today as it did that first year of the first century. The rich and the poor mingle in harmony in this story. The rich don’t withhold from the poor; they offer not only necessities, but luxury and beauty. For a few minutes, there’s a strong hint of the kingdom of God the grown Jesus will proclaim—peace on earth, good will toward all people, mercy to the poor—the acknowledgment of the full humanity of the poor, of women, and of children. The rich, the educated, the respected are kneeling before a child and a mother, in a poor hamlet in Bethlehem.”

There is a wonder to this story that draws us in. God comes among us—a God of unfettered hospitality who will dine with tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners, a God who will heal the sick, who will care for the poor and the outcasts of society, a God who will ultimately die on a cross so that he might rise again and give us eternal life. This is a God who dwells among us, who dwells in us, who speaks to us in the still small voice, who comforts us, who brings us peace in the midst of pain, whose Grace knows no limit.

A story is told of a little girl whose mother had just given birth to a baby boy. When the baby brother came home, this little girl was all excited, and she wanted more than anything to spend some time alone with him. She asked—then begged, pleaded, and cajoled her parents: “Please let me spend some time with my baby brother! I have to see him alone!” The parents, of course, were fearful, thinking that she might not understand and hurt the child. But at her insistence, they finally gave in to her. So she went into the baby’s bedroom and closed the door behind her. But the parents opened it a crack so that they could observe, and this is what they heard: The little girl leaned over the crib and said, “Tell me again what God is like! I’m starting to forget!”

When we start to forget what God is like, we can revisit this epiphany story and kneel in awe with the Magi at the feet of the newborn babe and his mother. We can allow the wonder of his birth to wash over us, and we can offer our profound love for the gift of God’s presence among us.

We lay before the babe our gifts. They may not be ones of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but rather the more precious gift of ourselves. Amen.