

## **“Gifts from Beyond”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
January 9, 2021 – The First Sunday after Epiphany/Baptism of Christ  
Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Today, we are recognizing Epiphany, which happens each year after the 12 days of Christmas are complete. As Epiphany was on Thursday of this last week, and we didn't have a service then, we are recognizing this very special day during the service today on this first Sunday after Epiphany, which is a day when we normally focus on the Baptism of Christ. This morning, we are recognizing both Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ (and as we are autonomous Congregationalists, we can do this!). And while the stories of Epiphany and the Baptism of Christ are, of course, quite different from one another, they also offer us a good and important lesson to look at this morning: Gifts came to Christ from beyond, and God still offers gifts from beyond.

Our first reading from the gospel of Matthew tells of the gifts -- precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh -- that came from beyond through characters called magi. These characters -- and we don't know how many there were -- came from somewhere beyond Judea, in the east, which is where the word magi itself is from, being a Persian word for people who were interpreters of dreams and celestial events and were considered to be wise sages. The gospel of Matthew, the only place where this story appears, doesn't tell us exactly where they came from. Names, countries of origin, and backstories were given to them much more recently, as was the title of king. Perhaps they were Zoroastrian priests from somewhere between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where magi were esteemed and served in temples and in the courts of rulers. Or perhaps they came from somewhere on the Arabian Peninsula, where some of the items they brought as precious gifts could be found. Wherever they were from, however many there were, whatever their names were, these mysterious characters represented the finest wisdom from outside of Israel; they were the spiritual elite of the Gentile world.

They came because they paid attention to the sky and found meaning in what they saw in it. When a special star arose (and it is common in ancient Greek and Roman literature to find stars or other heavenly phenomena appearing at the

birth of a new king), the star-gazing magi interpreted it to mean that a new king had been born in the distant land of the Roman province of Judaea, and so they gathered up their precious gifts fit for a king and headed west to Judaea, so that they could present their gifts and worship the new ruler. Maybe they rode on camels; maybe they traveled on foot. We don't really know. But we know they traveled from their land to Jerusalem, the capitol of Judaea, where they searched for the newborn king in the palace of the current king, Herod the Great. Even if you weren't a wise sage, you would expect to find the newborn ruler there in the palace, so it seems like the magi were being pretty wise by going to see Herod.

But there was no newborn in the palace of Herod the Great, who was not called Great because he was good. In fact, according to the gospel of Matthew and all other ancient accounts, he was an exceedingly rotten person and was called Great only because of his hold on power and his use of it to engage in extensive building projects. Herod and his family were not even from Judaea, but from neighboring Idumaea. They were installed as kings over the people of Judaea by the Romans after they conquered the land 60 years or so before Jesus' birth. According to 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish historian Josephus, Herod, king over the Jewish people, was himself only a "half-Jew," and was deeply despised by the Jewish people and their religious leaders. Always fearful of losing his grip on power, he was ruthlessly violent and murderous. He slaughtered the entire Sanhedrin, or Jewish ruling council, when he came to power; killed members of his own family he considered to be a threat; and violently suppressed every uprising against his rule or the rule of his Roman overlords.

You can imagine how he received the words of the magi, when they came to his childless palace seeking to worship the new king!

Filled with fear, he inquired from the wise ones of Israel, which is what the scribes and chief priests were, where the Christ, that is the Messiah, the long-expected, heavenly-sent ruler was to be born. "Bethlehem," they replied, which was a little town just a few miles outside of Jerusalem that was completely insignificant other than being the place where the people's beloved King David was born and raised. After learning from the sages of Israel where the new threat to his throne would be born, he sought to learn from the sages from the east the time when the star appeared to them, so that he could know how old this threat in Bethlehem was.

Then, trying to get the magi to do some of his dirty-work, he sent them off to find the exact house where the young ruler was living and then come back to offer him a report.

The magi left Jerusalem, still seeking guidance from the sky above them, and it was there that they saw the star once more, and followed where it led, to the humble home in Bethlehem, where which they found Jesus and his mother Mary. The magi, having found the child that they had been seeking for so long and after such a long journey, rejoiced! With great joy, they bowed down before Jesus and presented their precious gifts to the young ruler. After presenting themselves and their gifts, and still seeking guidance from beyond, God spoke to them in a dream, and they followed the guidance given them to go back to their distant home without returning to King Herod in Jerusalem to offer their report.

The passage in Matthew that follows today's reading, goes on to tell of how a furious Herod responded by having all of the boys younger than two, then living in Bethlehem, killed, but not before Jesus and his family escaped to the foreign land of Egypt.

The story tells us about two different types of people and their two different reactions to the event of the Messiah being born. When Herod and the religious leaders learned of the possible birth of a Messiah, they were filled with fear and responded to the threat to their power with terrible violence. The magi, on the other hand, visitors from a foreign land, Gentiles without the divine wisdom found in Israel's scripture, reacted with joy, devotion, and generosity. God's grace came to young Jesus not from the insiders, the spiritual and political leadership of the people of Israel, who were hostile to God's grace, but from the strange, star-gazing outsiders.

Grace also came to Christ from beyond at his baptism, when from the sky came a message of love and a symbol of divine blessing and empowerment. Just as the magi brought their precious gifts to Jesus from beyond, the Creator, who is above and beyond all things, offered the greatest grace in these gestures of perfect love.

We are also given grace from beyond. We have been given Jesus, the Christ, who is worthy of our joyous devotion and finest gifts. We have been given the same Spirit from beyond that was within Christ, that we may no longer be outsiders, but be intimately connected with God, who claims us as beloved children, and

one another in a loving community of faith. And because of God's uniting Spirit, we can look beyond the confines of our limited, individual human experiences and wisdom to see the wisdom and experiences of others, where we may discover new light that can lead us to enjoy new life.

How will we receive these gifts today? What if the coming gifts of God shake us up and call us or the world around us to change or to share or give up power? Will we be filled with fear? Will we respond with humility and faith? What if God reveals something new to us or leads us to do something that seems distant or foreign? Will we be willing in this new year to do something new?

This new Epiphany season, as we pay attention to God's Light that shined among us and still shines, let us be eager to follow the way of the magi in seeking to find Christ. Let us also follow them in joyfully offering to Christ our worship and devotion. Amen.