



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

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Epiphany: January 6, 2019

Sermon Title: “Five Epiphanies on Epiphany”

Gospel and Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Who were these strange visitors who came to Jerusalem, seeking the King of the Jews? Well, it depends who you ask. If you believe *the familiar old song*, they were three kings from the Orient. If you look at the *English translation* of our Gospel lesson, they are from somewhere in the East, and there’s no mention of how many there are. The assumption is that there are three visitors because three gifts are mentioned. But in reality, we have no idea how many visitors there were.

Things get really interesting though when we examine the underlying Greek of this lesson, which identifies them as “magos.” That’s where the word “magi” comes from, and it’s also the root of the word “magician.” Scholars are all over the map when it comes to identifying who and what these visitors were. On one end of the scale, some continue to assert that these visitors were indeed royalty, or at the very least high officials of a foreign ruler, probably from the region of Persia. Other scholars assert that these visitors – these magi – were employed by a foreign king, not as envoys or advisors but, instead, as astrologers whose job was to read the stars and discern the fates for the king who employed them. That makes sense, because they seem to be taking their initial steps toward Jesus in coordination with their interpretation of the stars.

Personally, I’m most persuaded by those scholars who say there was nothing particularly “wise” about these men at all. Instead, they were – as the Greek word suggests - magicians, astrologers, and sorcerers who the gentile kings of that day and age employed as fortune tellers and dream-interpreters. In 21st century terms, there are the guys who would be putting on magic shows, writing horoscopes, reading tarot cards, staffing the phones for the psychic hotline, or running a séance.

In the New Testament we see this term “magi” in one other place, the Book of Acts, where it describes a false prophet.¹ Early Christians went to great lengths to separate themselves from magi. Even the word itself was considered an insult, and so Matthew’s positive portrayal of magi is something the early church would’ve only grudgingly admitted, which gives me great confidence that this story was firmly grounded in history. There’d be no other reason for a Christian church so appalled by magicians like this to include them so prominently and positively in the childhood narrative of Jesus. And so I’m persuaded that the magi were not powerful kings – they were strange, quirky, and perhaps even embarrassing outsiders.²

In the end, it doesn’t matter whether you think the magi were exalted royalty or crackpot magicians. In *either* event, their appearance was highly unexpected both by Herod and by Mary

and Joseph. What *does* matter to us though are five important things the story of the magi reveals about Jesus. We might call them the “five epiphanies of epiphany.”

First, the magi stand as a powerful example of the way Jesus draws all manner of people to himself. Oddballs and quirky outsiders are just as welcome at Jesus’s table as the refined, the respectable, the powerful, the wealthy, and the influential. So don’t let *anyone* tell you that your background or your personality disqualifies you from being drawn to Jesus. Here at Grace we like to say that “all are welcome here” because that’s the standard Jesus set. And so to everyone hearing my voice today, know that there is a place for each and every one of you at Jesus’s table, and so there is a place for each and every one of you here at Grace.

Second, this story reveals that there’s an inherent and very provocative conflict between Jesus and the rulers of this world. Herod is completely unraveled and threatened by news of the birth of a rival king. That’s why he slaughtered the children of Bethlehem – an event the Church remembers each December 28. And that’s why he so cunningly tries to cultivate and coopt the magi for his own purposes. Under normal circumstances he wouldn’t have tolerated them for a second. Outsiders coming to honor a rival king? Off with their heads! But Herod was scared. Really scared. He wanted to exterminate this rival king, and he would use any means necessary to find him.

This conflict between Jesus and the powers of this world still rages today. In some parts of the world, nations actively suppress the practice of Christianity and persecute Christians. More commonly though, the conflict is much subtler, which arguably makes it more dangerous. It’s the conflict that arises when the world convincingly offers us replacement gods in substitution for Jesus: gods like profit, productivity, materialism, acclaim, and leisure. To be clear, there’s nothing inherently sinful about making a profit, being a productive person, enjoying a few nice things, being appreciated and respected, and having some free time to relax and recharge your batteries. But when those things become your *focus* – when they become your *idol* – then they have replaced our Lord Jesus. And friends, there can only be *one* king in our lives and in our hearts.

The third epiphany of Epiphany is that the gifts of the magi illustrate the full scope of Jesus’s identity. The symbolism of those gifts - gold, frankincense, and myrrh – would’ve been clear to Matthew’s original readers, but 2,000 years later, it’s less obvious for us. Each gift symbolizes an important aspect of who this obscure child – Jesus - really was. *Gold* was the gift of kings, and so that gift identifies Jesus as a true king, unlike the Herods of this world. *Frankincense* was an expensive Arabian perfume, often used in worship. It symbolizes Jesus’s divine nature. And *myrrh* was a fragrant tree resin used to anoint the dead. Myrrh reveals the human nature of Jesus, and foreshadows his coming death – a death that will trigger his – and our - ultimate victory.³

A fourth epiphany on Epiphany is found in the strange lengths God went to draw these magi to that transformational encounter with Jesus. God used a star, some snippets of scripture, and a dream. With all the love God has for *you*, just imagine all the surprising and unexpected people, places, and things God is using to draw *you* to the Christ child’s side. As the old saying goes, you can *run*, but you *can’t hide!*

The fifth and final epiphany of this story is that an encounter with Jesus is transformative. Whether you think the magi were kings or weird, quirky magicians, something changed in them when they met Jesus. They knelt down before him. They paid homage to him. Jesus had no throne or royal robes to mark his status and nothing of earthly value to reward them. Nevertheless, the magi were transformed by Jesus. They could've cashed in on their knowledge by racing back to Herod and telling him where this new king could be found. But instead, they heeded the message of a dream and took "another road." Their *path* changed. Their *direction* changed. I believe their *lives* changed. Jesus certainly changed *my* life. Believe me, I walk a *far* different road than I once did. I believe Jesus may have a different road in mind for you too. But don't let that scare you. As I said on Christmas Eve, *take a risk and trust Jesus*.

On this day of Epiphany, Jesus invites all of us – kings and outcasts alike - to take *another road*. It's a road only he could prepare - a road he illuminates with his grace, paves with hope, and uses to lead us *away* from the forces of this world that would enslave us, and instead leads us forward to the true peace, healing, salvation and liberation that exist only in Jesus Christ. This Epiphany, may *Christ's* road be *our* road, and may that road forever transform every future journey we take. Amen.

Citations

¹ Acts 13:6

² See France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT series), pp. 66-67.

³ France, pp. 75-76.