

Saint Stephen's EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Rev. Jennifer King Daugherty
The Second Sunday of Christmas – January 5, 2025

Gifts of the Magi

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12



Adoration of the Kings (Gerard David, ca. 1460-1523)

[Matthew 2:1-12] *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: `And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

In every Christmas pageant I've attended, from the low-budget ones of my childhood to more lavish costumed versions, the visitation of the three kings is a highlight. Sometimes, the highlight. At Saint Mark's cathedral, baby Jesus is a bit upstaged by the three kings, as children wearing the bishop's vestments ride into the nave on carts draped with rich fabric, ceremoniously accompanied by a Golden Retriever riding majestically on top of a catering cart. It is a sight to see. Closer to home, these three kings at St. Stephen's have been carefully disguised leaders of our parish, eminent in their chosen professions throughout the year, and regal in their roles on Christmas Eve.

The three kings are such a ubiquitous part of the Christmas story that it may surprise you to know that they only appear in one of the four gospels, Matthew's. Luke's gospel, which provides most of the Christmas pageant's stories, has no account of wise men or kings seeking the baby Jesus. So most Christmas pageants are a mash-up of Matthew's and Luke's accounts. Mark says nothing about the birth of Jesus and John describes Jesus' origin through poetic allegory rather

than birth narrative. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

It may also surprise you to know that in the original Greek, Matthew does not name those mysterious visitors from the East as wise men, or kings, or even three in number. They are *magoi*, "magi" in English, literally magicians, wizards from a foreign land who follow a star in search of the One who is born "King of the Jews." They aren't magician entertainers like Harry Houdini or David Copperfield. They are scientists, holders of special knowledge whose wisdom and predictions about the natural and celestial world make them invaluable to rulers and statesmen.

It wasn't until the third century that two theologians decided on the details that flesh out this familiar story. Tertullian inferred that these wise magi from distant lands must have been regarded as kings. And Origen concluded that there must have been three of them, since they came bearing three gifts.¹ So that's how we ended up with "We three kings from Orient are; bearing gifts, we traverse afar."

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*.

Why do these details matter? Well, because the Christmas story is so familiar and dear that it's easy to assume we know everything about it. And when we do, it becomes a sentimental tale easily reduced to a children's pageant we put on once a year.

But I'm pretty sure that wasn't Matthew's intention when he wrote his gospel and made the three magi from the East an essential part of Jesus' birth narrative. No, he is doing something far more powerful for Jesus' 1st century followers and for us today.

First, he is poking the bear that is the Roman Empire. Because when the magi appear in Jerusalem, they claim to be following a star that will lead them to worship the One born "King of the Jews." Well, that would have been a slap to King Herod, who had inherited that exact title from his father, Herod the Great, a title officially bestowed on him by the Roman Senate. Can you imagine Herod's fear and outrage when he hears a child has come to usurp it?

And adding insult to injury, the fact that the magi follow a star to find this blessed infant appropriates imperial theology, which ties the birth of Julius Caesar to the arrival of the star of

Venus. Now, the brightest star in the heavens doesn't herald the emperor's birth, but that of a common baby.

Matthew is rattling the cage of the Roman Empire -- for Christ and for his own community. The political system that conspired with religious authorities to crucify Jesus was the same one that destroyed the Jerusalem temple a generation later. It then fomented division in the Jewish community so that Matthew's believers were ejected from the synagogue. Matthew is shining the light on imperial arrogance and abuse of power that threatens not only his community's safety, but its very identity. It's a bold act.

Second, Matthew is sending a message to the synagogue authorities that God's redemptive work is not exclusive to a particular religious group, but includes outsiders as well. The Magi are Gentile foreigners, descendants of the magicians who in the Old Testament repeatedly oppose prophets, like Daniel.

But now these Gentiles are not a foil, but the ones who recognize that God is doing something new, while Herod and "all of Jerusalem with him" deny it. It is a complete reversal of spiritual leadership and lays the foundation for

Jesus as Messiah not just to a select few, but to all people. Remember, Jesus' parting words to his disciples at the end of Matthew's gospel are, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them everything I have taught you."

Oppose empire and include all in God's realm. These two ethical mandates have shaped our religious identity since before disciples of Jesus were called Christians, when they were just followers of "The Way." And they are at the heart of who we are today, here at St. Stephen's.

In a divisive political climate, the ethic of "opposing empire" can be too easily seen as resisting the persona or policies of one political party. But that's not what we are talking about here. We are talking about naming and resisting the misuse of power that amasses resources and influence for a select few while impoverishing and silencing others. That could be economic, social, political, or religious power.

This injustice takes place all across the political spectrum. We see it in growing economic inequity, infringement on bodily agency, and the persistence of "cancel culture," for example. Opposition to empire requires both

attention to the world around us and attention to the world within us.

Similarly, if we understand ourselves as living at the center of things, the ethic of inclusion becomes nothing more than sincere hospitality – all are welcome to come and join us in the world we have created. We'll just wait for you here on this side of the door.

That's not a bad thing, but it is a far distance from living as disciples, where the church is not a place, but a movement. A way of living characterized by compassion, tenderness, and humility, whether we are here at St. Stephen's, at work, or at home. Then there is no door, no boundary, just the infinite world around us saturated with God's presence.

Oppose empire and include all in God's realm. On this twelfth day of Christmas, the eve of the Epiphany, we are invited to identify with the magi, those outsiders, curious and trusting travelers, who bring all they have in offering to God. May we also traverse afar to bring our gifts of gold to acknowledge Christ's kingship, frankincense to honor his divinity, and myrrh, the herb of embalming, to share in his humanity. Amen.

