
Epiphany Today
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
January 3, 2021
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

The first few services after Christmas sometimes feel like a let-down. Our Christmas Eve service is the one service every year (other than funerals) at which we get our highest attendance. It's "the big show". Today is - just us. If Christmas Eve is like watching the final game of the World Series, then today's service is like sitting on a broken park bench on a dreary day watching some non-motivated people play catch - badly. Right? But perhaps not. Perhaps something exciting will happen today.

Today is called "Epiphany Sunday", but it actually kicks off a whole season - called the season of Epiphany. The season will take us all the way to Ash Wednesday and Lent. In general, the word "epiphany" means recognition of an important truth. And in the church, the word "Epiphany" refers to different people recognizing Jesus as the son of God. By tradition, that recognition happened in 3 phases. The first phase is the baptism of Jesus (which we celebrate next week). That is considered an epiphany because during the baptism, the spirit descends on Jesus and announces that Jesus is the son of God. That story has been celebrated since the early days of the church. By the 3rd or 4th century, Epiphany came to include the story of the magi (which we read today), who similarly announce that Jesus is the son of God. And during the middle ages, Epiphany was expanded again to include the story of Jesus turning water into wine. That story is part of Epiphany because it included a demonstration that Jesus was the son of God.

Today we celebrate the story of the magi. In an effort to understand the story, let's start by considering what we know about the magi, and where that information comes from. You probably think the story comes from the Bible, so let's start there. "The magi" actually have many different titles:

- New International Version: "Magi from the east". (footnote says traditionally, wise men.)

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- The Message: “a band of scholars”
 - Revised Standard: “wise men from the east”.
 - Good News: “some men who studied the stars came from the east”.
 - Living Bible: “some astrologers from eastern lands”
 - The Voice: “magi, wise men or seers from the east”

We have other sources of course. From the song “We Three Kings” we get the impression that the men in question were kings, and that there were 3 of them. Nothing in the Bible suggests that they were kings. The reformer John Calvin was actually vehemently opposed to referring to the Magi as kings. He wrote: “But the most ridiculous contrivance of the Papists on this subject is, that those men were kings ... Beyond all doubt, they have been stupefied by a righteous judgment of God, that all might laugh at [their] gross ignorance.” As far as I can figure out, by the 3rd century the magi began to be considered as kings. By the 6th century they had names: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. And a 14th century Armenian tradition connected those kings with places. Balthasar being declared the King of Arabia, Melchior the King of Persia, and Gaspar the King of India. The whole idea of the magi being kings comes from Church history, not the Bible. But that does allow for a much better song.

“Magi” was the Persian name given to the hereditary priesthood of the Medes, what today we would call Kurds. The word is connected with paying attention to the stars, and the occult. Magi is linguistically connected to the modern word, “magic”. “First-century naturalist Pliny the Elder wrote several chapters about the Magi. In his description, they sound more like something from a Harry Potter novel. He details their skill in magic arts - including pouring boiled earthworms in the ear to cure a toothache!”

So who were these guys? kings? magicians? astrologers? wise men (whatever that means)? And we have no idea how many there were. In the Bible, it doesn’t say how many there are. The Bible says that there were 3 gifts. Our tradition is therefore to imagine that there were 3 men. Orthodox traditions usually imagine 12 of them. It’s almost as if the story was just made up!

Some scholars connect the gifts themselves with deeper meanings for Jesus:

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- gold -> king
 - frankincense -> priestly duties
 - myrrh -> embalming ointment for death.

The story of the magi clearly creates more questions than it answers. The obvious question - which I'm sure is already in Norma's mind, is simply - what happened to the money?? There are no clues given.

But perhaps the most interesting question is this - given that the events described never happened, why is Matthew telling this story at all? Any why should we care today? I feel a history lesson coming on. The exciting part will be relating this story to today. Trust me - we'll get there!

Question: If you were alive 2000 years ago, is the story of the magi already known to you, perhaps in a slightly different form? Does it sound familiar? Does it sound like other stories that are in the Old Testament? Is the magi story perhaps a re-telling of a theme that runs through the Old Testament? The answer is of course, yes. The key elements of the story of the magi appears in at least 2 if not 4 other places in the Old Testament. Christians often miss this because we read the Old Testament differently than Jewish people do. If we remember the basic narrative that drives the Old Testament from a traditional Jewish perspective, it makes more sense why Matthew tells the story of the magi.

In Genesis, for example, we have the story of Joseph. In the story, Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, and eventually came to work for the Pharaoh of Egypt. And then, Pharaoh had a series of dreams about 7 fat cows, 7 skinny cows, 7 ears of grain. And Pharaoh called for all the wise men and magicians in Egypt to interpret the dreams for him, and they all failed. So Pharaoh asked Joseph, who did interpret the dreams (which you may recall were about 7 years of abundance followed by 7 years of famine). So Pharaoh promoted Joseph to his second-in-command and "Pharaoh had Joseph ride in the chariot of his second-in-command; and they cried out in front of him, 'Bow the knee!' Thus Pharaoh set Joseph over all the land of Egypt." (Genesis 41:43

(NRSV)). So in that story, we have magi bowing to Joseph, Joseph being seen as the saviour of the Hebrew people at that time because the whole Joseph story is about Joseph saving the Hebrew people from starvation and therefore from extinction.

An even more direct analog to the magi story is found in 1 Kings 10, where the Queen of Sheba came to visit Solomon. She came to Jerusalem with a caravan of camels carrying spices, gold, and precious stones. She gave these gifts to Solomon because she was so impressed with his wisdom. This is why the lectionary includes the reading from Isaiah 60 this morning, “the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” And from Psalm 72, “may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.” (Psalm 72:10b-11. (NRSV)) Sounds a lot like the magi giving gifts to Jesus and bowing down before him. And if you are not willing to make the connection between Jesus and Solomon yourself, Matthew makes the connection himself in chapter 12. Referring to Jesus, Matthew said, “see, something greater than Solomon is here!” (Matthew 12:42c (NRSV)).

The story of the magi would have been very familiar to Matthew’s audience, because it continues a narrative that runs through the Old Testament. That narrative is that all nations will bow down to the Hebrew people, a story that in the Old Testament happened with Moses, with Joseph, with Solomon, with Daniel. And according to Matthew that story continues with Jesus. Matthew was wrong about that of course. But when we understand that perspective, we at least understand why Matthew included the story at all.

So much for the past. We are not restricted to a Jewish interpretation of the magi story anyway. So - what does the magi story mean for us today? What might it mean? Or more broadly, what does Epiphany mean to us?

Traditionally, Epiphany is recognizing God in our midst. Today, that project still makes sense. Today, we can continue to look for God in our midst. In fact, This particular Sunday - the first Sunday in 2021 is a great day to start that project.

How will we look for God in our midst in 2021?

2020 was certainly a challenging year. We had many transitions in our personal lives, as well as in the life of this community of faith. And 2021 is starting for us - with a lockdown because of the pandemic. Perhaps not the most promising start to a new year. We are all preparing for January to be a tough grind. But 2021 will gradually improve over time as vaccines are given out and we all evolve - once again - into yet another new normal.

And as we do this, I am hopeful that we will find new ways to reach out. New ways to reach out to each other but also to reach out to our own community. The pandemic has taken away many of our outreach activities. But 2021 will be the year to bring that back - in new ways perhaps. The pandemic has taken away our old outreach programs, but it has also created - it is still creating - new possibilities. Because of the pandemic, Brantford has a different mix of community needs now. Some needs are familiar - food, employment, shelter. But the pandemic has given us a re-newed understanding of the need for support around mental health and mental wellness.

We can engage with the mental wellness needs in our community. Because many mental wellness issues are caused by isolation. Which means that these needs can be met by connecting with others, being present with others. Listening to others. The pandemic has caused us to re-define what “essential services” means. And one “service” we used to take for granted was simply being able to connect with each other. The pandemic has revealed to us that connecting to others is essential.

Many people feel alone and isolated. Limitless potential here as we move forwards.

As one part of that, I have been representing SHUC at meetings put on by the city around the new “Brantford Immigration Partnership” program. That program is almost ready to go public, giving us a vehicle to reach out to newcomers to Brantford. And as we reach out, we can’t help but become more connected ourselves. What does reaching out to newcomers look like? It might just look like friendship.

Epiphany is about finding God in our midst. And where better to do that on our own streets. Making new connections and looking for God with open eyes. Perhaps today we won’t be connecting on our streets. We are limited to connecting by phone, email,

texts, and other ways. But the lockdown will end. We will emerge from our collective cocoons and we will meet on our own streets and in shops, malls, libraries, again.

God is in our midst already. Epiphany is coming. Epiphany is here. I can't wait for 2021 to really get rolling. This year will be a year of new connections.

Amen.