
Epiphany Today
Chapel in the Park United Church
January 5, 2025
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 bit of a let-down, don't they? Our Christmas Eve service is one of the most energetic services we have. With lots of carol singing and all the extras. Some of us are blessed to have family and friends join with us on Christmas Eve, which is always special. Our Christmas Eve service is in many ways "the big show" of the whole year. Today is - just us. If participating in a Christmas Eve service is like watching the final game of the World Series, then today's service can feel like sitting on a broken park bench on a rainy day watching some non-motivated people play catch - badly. Right?

But being "just us" is in some ways wonderful too. Perhaps the excitement of Christmas is behind us. But we are once again invited into that magical space called "normal life". And that space is made more special because of all of "us". Perhaps today will be a celebration of normal life.

[image: I tried being normal]

But perhaps not. Because the church calendar has other plans for us.

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 at which time we will move into Lent. In general, the word "epiphany" means recognition of an important truth. And in the church, the word "Epiphany" refers to people recognizing Jesus as the son of God.

By tradition, that recognition happened 3 times.

[image: baptism of jesus]

The first time was at the baptism of Jesus (which we will 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.

[image: story of the magi]

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.

[image: story water into wine]

And during the middle ages, Epiphany was expanded yet again to include the story of Jesus turning water into wine. That story is considered to be 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 our information comes from. You probably think the story comes from the Bible, so let's start there. "The magi" actually have many different titles depending on which Bible translation you use:

[image: the list below]

- New International Version: "Magi from the east". (footnote says traditionally, wise men.)
- 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 Christmas Carol "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. Or that there were 3 of them. 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 actual places. Balthasar being declared to be 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 the idea that they were kings does at least make for a better song.

[image: wizard]

“Magi” was the Persian name given to the hereditary priesthood of the Medes (may-deez), who 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 like something right out of Harry Potter. He details their skill in magic arts - including a story where they poured boiled earthworms into someone’s ear to cure a toothache!”

Some scholars connect the gifts from the magi with deeper meanings for Jesus:

[image: the following list]

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

So who were these guys? kings? magicians? hustlers? astrologers? wise men (whatever that means)? And we have no idea how many there were. In the Bible, it does not say how many there were. The Bible says that there were 3 gifts. So in Western church tradition it we decided that there were 3 magi. But in Eastern tradition there are 12 magi. It’s almost as if the story was just made up!

The story of the magi creates more questions than it answers. The obvious question - which I’m sure is already in Yolanda’s mind, is simply - what happened to the money?? I mean if Mary and Joseph were given those extremely valuable gifts - what happened to them? It seems strange that the vast amount of wealth given to Jesus at his birth had absolutely no impact on his life. Moreover, if the gifts did not impact Jesus’s life, what was the point of giving them to Jesus in the first place?

But perhaps a more interesting question is this: Given that the events described in the story of the magi obviously never happened, why is Matthew telling this story at all? And why does Matthew tell this story in the way that he does. One big clue is the fact that the story of the magi is found only in Matthew. As you may recall, Matthew was written

for an exclusively Jewish audience. And the entire gospel of Matthew boils down to Matthew wanting the reader to see Jesus as the awaited Jewish messiah.

And of course we will get to the most important question of all - which is why should we care about this today? But that comes later. First, we need a bit of history.

[image: ... question]

Let's do a little thought experiment. Imagine that you are a Jewish person living 2000 years ago. Here's a question for you: Is the story of the magi already quite well known to you, perhaps in a slightly different form? Does the story sound familiar? Does it sound like other stories that are in the Old Testament? Is the story of the magi 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 appear in at least 2 if not 4 places in the Old Testament depending on your interpretation.

As Christians we often miss this because we read the Old Testament from - obviously - a Christian perspective. And we read the story of the magi as if it is a unique story in its own right. But if we remember the basic narrative that drives the Old Testament from a traditional Jewish perspective, we can perhaps appreciate Matthew's story of the magi in the way more like what Matthew intended.

In the end, we may or may not agree with Matthew's conclusion, but at least it will make sense why Matthew wrote the story in the way that he did.

And as a caution, do not assume that modern day Jews agree with the traditional narrative from 2000 years ago either. As always, if you want to know what someone else thinks, you need to actually talk to them. And you need to listen to them.

Anyway, with that long preamble out of the way, here are the 2 strongest linkages in my mind between the Old Testament and Matthew's story of the magi.

[image: 7 fat cows, 7 skinny cows]

In Genesis, for example, we have the story of Joseph. You remember him. The Joseph with the coat of many colours. In the story, Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, and eventually came to work for the Pharaoh in Egypt. And in the story, Pharaoh had a series of dreams. You remember those? One dream was about cows - 7 fat cows followed by 7 skinny cows. Another dream was about grain - 7 plump ears of grain

followed by 7 thin ears of grain.

Pharaoh called for all the wise men and magicians in Egypt to interpret the dreams for him, and they all failed. So then, Pharaoh asked Joseph to interpret the dreams. And he did. Joseph said that the dreams were a prediction about 7 years of abundance followed by 7 years of famine. And this interpretation pleased Pharaoh.

So Pharaoh promoted Joseph to his second-in-command and from Genesis 41:43, “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.”

So in that story we have Pharaoh placing Joseph above all the “wise men and magicians in Egypt”. And therefore we have the wise men bowing down to Joseph. In Jewish tradition, Joseph is seen as the saviour of the Hebrew people at that time. So we have - in Genesis - a story of wise men and magicians bowing down to a saviour. Sound familiar?

[image: queen of sheba]

An even more direct analog to Matthew’s 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 foreign magi giving gifts to Jesus and bowing down before him, right?

And if you are not willing to make the connection between Jesus and Solomon yourself, Matthew makes the connection for us in chapter 12. Referring to Jesus, Matthew said, “see, something greater than Solomon is here!” (Matthew 12:42c (NRSV)).

[image: magi]

The story of the magi would have been very familiar to Matthew's Jewish 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. That is a narrative that according to the Old Testament happened with Moses, with Joseph, with Solomon, and with Daniel. And according to Matthew that narrative continues with Jesus. Matthew was wrong about that of course. And the entire exodus story is not historical anyway. But when we understand that perspective, we at least understand why Matthew created the story, in the way that he did, for his particular audience.

So much for the past. We are not restricted to a traditional 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?

Or let's go even more broadly. What epiphany do we need today? If epiphany is the revelation of a great truth, what epiphany do we need today? Seriously! What epiphany do you need today? What epiphany does our planet need today? What truths do we need to hear and then live by today?

Jesus said the truth will set us free. So what truth do we need to hear. Today.

- As the so-called holy land has been turned into the most unholy and ungodly place on earth, what epiphany do we need today?
- As our paid media tries to whip us all into a frenzy of hatred and bigotry, what epiphany do we need today?
- As our closest trading partner moves as fast as it can to become an authoritarian regime, what epiphany do we need today?
- As our own democratic systems refuse to help common people and seem to only serve money and power, what epiphany do we need today?
- As our entire planet suffers from decades-ignored issues caused by corruption, greed, and stupidity, what epiphany do we need today?
- As each of us have our own personal struggles in our own lives. Perhaps with a medical or mental condition. Or with an emotional issue, or a relationship issue, what epiphany do we need today?

[image: welcome to normal life]

I have a proposal for you all. It's a proposal for 2025. I propose that we find the epiphanies we need - or at least some of them - together in this community as the year unfolds. We will find the epiphanies we need by being open and honest with each other. By being honest with ourselves about our own fears, frustrations, and insecurities. By opening our hearts to our deepest emotions. By opening our hearts and minds to the many good things that are all around us. By embracing our wider communities. By knowing right down to our socks that we are worth loving. By living into the truth that all of us deserve to find joy and peace. By sharing our lives together. That's my proposal to you. Are you up for it?

We will find the truths that we need using a simple tool called "normal life". And by sharing that normal life together. I am so delighted to be with you all as we discover where we will go in our new year.

Happy 2025.

Amen.