

## The Epiphany of Our Lord (observed) • January 4, 2009

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Matthew 2:1-12

"Kings"

Blessed Epiphany to you! On Christmas Day, I'd mentioned my struggles in finding really good Christmas cards to send to friends and family. Over the past many years of seeking out these top-notch notes, out of all the box sets I've found, which card do you suppose I've thought looked the best? One of my favorites looks like this: on the cover, inside a broad and textured golden border, you'll find a stylized, linear image of three kings bearing their gifts, guided by a star overhead. It's an card depicting part of our text from Matthew 2 – an unlikely choice, I admit. If you're familiar with the church calendar, you know that on January 6 we observe Epiphany, sometimes known as the "Gentiles' Christmas." You've also heard that Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Jesus as savior of the world. The Magi were Gentiles, people who are not of Jewish descent – that's a big deal, especially as these visitors from the East are only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, the Gospel which particularly points to Jesus as the fulfillment of the hope of the *Jewish* people. So why did the evangelist record the visit of the Magi? Why did they even make this journey in the first place? Were they, in fact, "three kings of Orient," as our carol goes? **When we think about the Magi as "wise men," or as the three kings found on the front of my Christmas card, we can miss out on what their visit tells us about God.**

The Magi did come from the East bearing gifts fit for an earthly king – not to worship Jesus as deity, but to reverence him as king of the Jews. And though these visitors may have been learned in their arts, we shouldn't look to them as "wise men" in a spiritual way. When Scripture uses the word "magi," it usually refers to people who practice astrology or divination, those who seek signs from the stars. Magi are named in the company of wizards, enchanters, and sorcerers, people who are enemies of the one true God. The worldly knowledge that Magi *did* have was lacking. When it comes down to it, rather than being wise men, these visitors from the East seem pretty *confused* regarding Jesus and Who he is. Nothing would indicate that they'd known that Jesus was Immanuel, God-with-us, and that they'd come seeking the Savior of all people. So what would draw these unlikely guys to the Messiah that Scripture foretold? **Here, as in our lives, God reaches down to those who are lost and brings them to Himself.**

God is the one who makes Epiphany happen, right from the get-go. God uses the star in the sky to call attention to Jesus' birth. So, journeying to pay reverence to a new king, the Magi do what we might do: they head to the capital city, Jerusalem. (In a few weeks, we here in Washington, D.C. area will see a number of people doing something similar for the presidential inauguration.) When they get there, they find leaders who are even less aware of what's happened than they themselves are. God directs them again, this time speaking through the words of Scripture to point to Bethlehem in Judah, the town that would be the birthplace of a great Ruler. God guides the Magi further, leading them by the star to the very place where the child was. And before the visitors naively return to report the child to Herod, God intervenes, warning them in a dream to return home by a different route.

You've probably read Bible studies or heard Epiphany sermons in past years that point out that Scripture doesn't give any indication of how many Magi came to honor the child who had been born, though popular tradition has associated one with each of the named gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew does not number the visitors, so we do not know how many there might have been. What we *do* know, though, is that such people would serve in royal courts; they were not

themselves rulers. There are only *two* kings in our text today, and neither of them arrives with the Magi.

The ruler that we now know as Herod the Great came to power in 40 B.C., when the Roman Senate named him king of Judea at the age of 33. Thanks to his own abilities and political savvy and the support of Roman Emperors, Herod consolidated his power in the region and quashed the opposition. Herod was a king who loved power and was not timid about doing what he thought was needed to keep it. Towards the end of his life, he seems to have been afflicted with an illness which prompted him to reinforce his jealous grasp on his kingdom. **Fear motivated Herod, the fear of losing the power that he so dearly loved.** In addition to ordering the killings of political rivals, he also saw to the death of his wife and a number of his own sons. That being said, it's easier to understand how Herod was troubled when the Magi came to report that the king of the Jews had been born – and all Jerusalem was troubled, too, in anticipation of Herod's response to such news!

So... thus far in our narrative, we've got A) an indeterminate number of non-royal foreign astrologists and B) a paranoid king who many of his own people view as a pretender to the throne. (That gives a different dimension to our Christmas carols, eh?) The Magi have come to this point through a mix of curiosity, customs, and confusion. Herod now sits in anxiety and jealous fear. As we remember Epiphany this year, how much are we like these people of old? How has curiosity led us down unexpected paths, only to find ourselves searching for direction? How have we observed the customs of our culture without understanding *why* we do such things? How often do we make assumptions about the people and circumstances around us and end up confusing our perceptions with reality? At the beginning of this new year, we might be feeling a little bit of anxiety about the future, wondering how we might hold on to what we've got, jealously clutching our datebooks and our checkbooks in uncertain times. **We need a good king, one who would protect and guide us.**

The star led those visitors from the East to that King. In contrast to the rulers of day, Jesus was not born in a great capital city, like Jerusalem, but in the modest little town of Bethlehem. God the Son came as one unknown to the world, overlooked by the leaders of the day, revealing Himself through foreign strangers who came seeking an altogether different kind of king. This, the one true King, came into the world to rule through service to His people, not through force, but through sacrifice – even death on the cross. So what could prompt God to do this? What brought *Him* to Bethlehem? It wasn't curiosity or custom or confusion. He had a purpose, one which He made known even to Adam and Eve. It wasn't jealousy or fear of losing power; indeed, He *set aside* His great glory and power to be born among us. So why did God come in such an unlikely way, to such unlikely witnesses, for such an unworthy people as us? Why celebrate the visit of the Magi to the child Jesus? It's about God's grace.

God's grace brought the Messiah to Bethlehem. God's grace brought the Magi from the East, rejoicing with exceedingly great joy in seeing the King who had been born. In a time of confusion and uncertainty, God comes to us and calls us to share in the joy of the Magi, rejoicing that we have a King who lives among his people, a King who gives himself for us. This is the good news of Epiphany: we have a King unlike any other, and he has called us to be his people.

Have you been wondering about the message that was printed on the inside of my Epiphany-themed Christmas card? It reads: "As we hear the Good News, may we share the great joy." This Epiphany, may we, like the Magi, rejoice with exceedingly great joy – for our king has come!

Amen.