

Guided by the Eastern Star

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Shine your truth into our lives, O God.
Sharpen our awareness of your abundant gifts.
Attune us to your signs that lead us to Jesus.
As heirs of your promise, guide us by your eternal purposes,
that the church may make your wisdom known to all people
in all places and listen to those through whom you speak.
In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Background

Can I just say, our Epiphany gospel reading this morning is so incredibly fascinating? It's only found in Matthew's gospel—not in Mark, Luke, or John.

Studying the visit of the Magi makes me feel like a kid in a candy shop. Matthew 2 is like gazing upon a luscious Christmas buffet—so much delicious food and so little plate.

Of all the passages in the New Testament, this one has the most lively and creative history of interpretation over the centuries.

There are a thousand shiny objects to chase after here, and not just the famous Star of Bethlehem.

*Where is Joseph? Whose house do they go to?
What country are the magi from?
How are their lives different after encountering Jesus?*

One other tasty morsal before we dive in. You will hear the word “homage” three times in this passage. The Webster New World Dictionary (used by the New York Times) offers two pronunciations for this intriguing word:

- **om-aj** or **hom-aj**. Both are correct pronunciations, but recently the first pronunciation,
- **om-aj**, is used a little more often.

You say homage, I say (h)omage. Either way, homage means “*to throw oneself down in worship—either before God or a King.*” And in this case with Christ, it’s both.

In fact, this word “homage” is used primarily for Jesus in the gospels. Homage is our proper response to Jesus. So Immanuel, let’s join the Magi and lay down our gifts and our very lives before Christ, in humble adoration.

Let’s hear now our gospel reading for Epiphany Sunday.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSVue)

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘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^[d] my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

SERMON – “*Guided by the Eastern Star*”

Matthew chapter 1 introduces the Messiah by **genealogy**—the famous “begats.”

Matthew chapter 2 now introduces the Messiah by **geography**. The phrase “Bethlehem of Judea” is mentioned 4 x in our passage. This repetition is no accident. Matthew’s telling us Jesus is firmly in the line of David. The long-awaited Messiah and Shepherd King has arrived.

Matthew (and the magi) are letting us know that Jesus is the King of the Jews. This phrase “King of the Jews” bookends the life of Jesus: the **birth of the Messiah** and at **the death of the Messiah**.

So what we have here is a tale of two kings: **King Herod** and **King Jesus**—a false king and God’s true king. And so we have to decide, along with the Magi:

- Which king will we listen to?
- Which king will we follow, will we trust: Herod or Jesus?

Herod was a king who was always struggling for power and respect. Always paranoid of sharing power or losing power. He had a long track record of using brutality to protect his throne.

With kings like Herod, you have to look at their actions more than their words. Herod said that he wanted to seek out and pay homage to Christ, but in reality, he was on a seek and destroy mission. This king of the Jews was a threat to his power. And that led to Herod’s massacre of the innocents to solidify his reign.

In contrast, we have King Jesus, whose reign brings not terror, but comfort, joy, and peace. “Be not afraid” the angels say of him. He came not to be served, but to serve. The King of the Jews came to die so that we might live. “Unto us a Son is given.”

Matthew shows us that Jesus is not only a king, but he’s a **New Moses**.

Moses faced danger from Pharaoh as a child, Jesus faced danger from Herod.

Both were rescued from massacre. Moses was led out of Egypt into freedom. So too was Jesus led out of Egypt and back to Judea into freedom after Herod died. Moses was led by a pillar of fire by night. The Magi were led to Christ by a starry flame by night.

I love the Magi. Christians have loved these wise men since the very beginning. In the catacombs of the early church, it was the Magi who were most often depicted giving their gifts to the Christ child. More than the shepherds and the angels. These mysterious and meek magi have so much to teach us. They weren’t Jewish, they were likely Persian. Probably Zoroastrian priests, astrologers, and philosophers. We get the word “magic” from “magi.” Throughout the world, they were held in high esteem for their wisdom. From the magi we learn that God loves ALL people, Jew and Gentile alike. And God can speak to all people.

Matthew doesn't mention how many there were. The West assumes three because of the three gifts, but the Syrian church says there were twelve. We don't know their names, but church tradition got creative and filled in the blanks:

- Casper is a clean-shaven young man,
- Melchoir an old man with facial hair,
- and Balthasar a person of color.

The Catholic church teaches the Apostle Thomas eventually converted them. These astrologers were star followers and Jesus followers. They didn't fit the Judeo-Christian mold. Yet, God's hand was upon them, leading them and speaking to them—through stars and dreams and scripture.

- They had a spiritual hunger that moved them.
- They kept following the star and went to where it led.
- They offered their gifts and reverently knelt before the Christ child.
- Their gifts were costly and imported.
- The magi were magnanimous.

It's really interesting how their gifts have been interpreted through church history. The early church fathers, Irenaeus and Origen, were the first to say the myrrh was used for burial and foretold Christ's death. Frankincense was used by priests in temple worship, Jesus is our High Priest. Later the gifts were said to represent **good works, prayer, and self-discipline**. Gregory the Great said they are confessions of **faith, hope, and love**. For Martin Luther, they were the gifts of **mercy, prayer, and purity**.

Well, the mysterious magi went back home a different way and are never heard from again.

A different way.

We've got to be comfortable with different ways. These wise men were led by God along a different path, a path that got them where they needed to go. We need to let them go their way. Not force our way on them.

God still works in surprising and mysterious ways, with surprising and mysterious people. Let's be open and welcoming to our modern day Magis. We have much to learn from other cultures and religions. It's spiritually enriching for us to study the world's religions. And today, countless Muslims, Buddhists, and other spiritual seekers—these modern day magis—can lead us to Christ, making us aware of the new things God is doing. They can teach us how to pay homage to Christ. Their unique gifts offered to God should be celebrated and treasured. So let's embrace and love them. Extend welcome and hospitality. Like the Magi, let's be paying close attention to God's signs.

There are two books that speak to us of the Messiah:

- The Book of the Stars (God's creation) and
- The Book of the Scriptures.

The Magi used both in their spiritual quest. Let us do the same

At that time, it was believed that every person was assigned a star by God at birth. If you were a significant person, you had a large and bright star. A **miraculous star** marked Jesus' birth in Matthew and an **earthquake and darkness** marked Jesus' death in Matthew. This is God's code language for: LISTEN TO HIM.

There's debate if the star in our story was a supernova, a comet, or the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. We don't know. The key is to not get too focused upon the star, but rather what the star points to, or who it points to. And to remember whatever it was, it was miraculous. Jesus' star was the star of Bethlehem. And the question for us is will we follow the star to Jesus, or will we remain where we are, afraid and stuck in our familiarity?

The visit of the magi reminds us of another important thing: God is guiding, God was guiding the Magi, and he's guiding us today. Like the shepherds, and Mary and Joseph, and the magi, we've got to be paying attention to the signs and following where they lead.

Immanuel, let's be willing to go wherever God is sending us.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*The Three Magi Are Called to Herod*," 5th century mosaic, Santa Maria Maggiore
<https://www.walksinrome.com/blog/images-of-the-adoration-of-the-magi-in-rome>

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