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"The Message of the Magi"  
Isaiah 60:1-6 Matthew 2:1-12 Ephesians 3:1-12

**INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 60:1-6**

From exile Isaiah envisions a day when the temple will be rebuilt and sons and daughters will return to see it. He envisions foreign dignitaries coming and bringing gifts, two of which were brought to honor the Christ child. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 60:1-6

**INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 2:1-12**

On the night Jesus was born there was only one group of people who were notified of the extraordinary event--a group of shepherds. In their day they were considered the poorest of the poor. .

This morning's gospel lesson features people who were at the other end of the spectrum. Unlike tourists in Hollywood, they didn't have a map to the stars....they looked to the stars for a map.

This morning I want us to look at this, the only other group of people who received a divine invitation to behold the glory of God's incarnation in the Christ as a child. Hear now the word of God from Matthew 2:1-12

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Let's pray.

Lord, we are humbled by the humbling of these who took the time to travel far to worship one who was born to be King of a nation other than theirs. Help us to understand the significance of this story for their lives and for ours. Amen.

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Once there were three six-year-old boys who were playing the wise men in their church Christmas program. As they came up to Mary and Joseph at the stable, the first one handed over his present and said, "Gold." The second presented his gift and said, "Myrrh." The third one then gave them his treasure and said, "And Frank sent this."

Of course, if it had been the Three Wise Women who came seeking the newborn king they would have arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, and brought a casserole, along with more practical gifts.

This morning is of course, the closest Sunday to Epiphany, January 6<sup>th</sup>, which is the 12th day OF Christmas. Yesterday was the drummers drumming day.

Epiphany is the day we normally celebrate the arrival of the foreign dignitaries from the east who searched for and found Jesus and worshipped him and brought him gifts.

In the language of the world, the word Epiphany it refers to a revelation, a discovery, a new way of understanding or a brilliant insight. When someone sees things in a fresh way they say, "I had an epiphany."

In the language of the church it refers to an appearing of God's glory. It refers to the glimpse of the glory surrounding the child born to be the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

I want us to begin this New Year with an epiphany, a new way of seeing, a vision, an image of what our world can be, of what our lives can yet be. We need more than a New Year's Resolution. We even need more than a New Year's Revolution. We need a Revelation of who God is and who God is calling us to be. Like those who traveled far to find the Christ Child we need to open our minds, stretch our imaginations, to see if we too can catch a glimpse of what God is calling us to do, to see on what journey Jesus is calling us to embark in this New Year.

Of course, there's danger in being a searcher. The world has little patience for those who see things differently. But this is where change begins--with those who are searching. Did you come this morning searching or are you so content with the things of this world that you no longer hunger for a fresh encounter with God? God loves searchers. God rewards searchers with epiphanies.

There are legends about this story of the searchers from the east. In antiquity some believed that there were 12 men who made the journey. Many folks assume there were three possibly based on the record that there were three gifts presented. (To assume that though is to assume that, unlike today, folks in those times had never heard of "going in together on a gift."☺) One old legend provides names for the three searchers: Melchior was the oldest of the group, with a full beard. He gave the baby the gift of gold. Balthasar also had a beard, but was not as old as Melchior. He presented the gift of myrrh. The youngest of the three was Caspar, who had no beard yet, but did present the gift of frankincense.

Another assumption is that there were only men in the search party, but it doesn't say that in the scriptures. I think there MIGHT have been a woman or two in their party because after all they did stop in Jerusalem to ask directions... So to allow for the possibility that there could have been women in the entourage from now on in the sermon I will refer to these searchers with the term the scripture uses: Magi instead of wise men.

Over the years the Greek word describing these foreign dignitaries has been understood in different ways. Some have understood the word to describe people who were considered sages or "wise people." Jews however wouldn't have considered them to be wise. In their eyes these star gazers worshipped the creation instead of the creator.

Some have translated it as "kings". That's where we get the song "We three kings of orient are". They certainly lived like kings compared to the lifestyle of the average Hebrew living in a country occupied by Roman troops. They had to be independently

wealthy to take off work to go on such a search. If they were kings though, they would have to have been from three different countries. (one king per country)

Nobody really knows from what country or countries the Magi came. Some commentators say they were from Arabia or Mesopotamia. Some say they were from Persia (or modern day Iran). Others say they were from Babylon (or modern day Iraq). Some say they were from even further away, as far away as India.

The only wisdom or knowledge that they had was that which they gleaned from spending time studying something the average person who had to work to put food on the table had no time to study. They studied the stars.

The magi knew the star meant a king was born, but where, to what royal family; under what political circumstances? Assuming that the King of the Jews would be born in the palace they headed for Jerusalem.

Even though Herod was king of the Jews, he had not been to Bible Study in a long time. Fortunately for the Magi, there were some religious people on Herod's payroll, and they knew what the Bible reported about the birth of the Messiah. The chief priests and scribes open up the scrolls to the fifth chapter of Micah and announce, "The new keeper of God's flock will be born in the city of David."

There is no assurance that knowledge of the Scriptures alone is sufficient to truly know God. King Herod's experts on the scriptures knew where the king was to be born, but did they do anything about their knowledge? Did they accompany the magi to Bethlehem? No they didn't. They knew the scriptures ... but did nothing about it.

The magi didn't know the scriptures, but when they found out even the smallest bit of information from them ... they acted...they continued their search.

The universality of Jesus' appeal is illustrated by those who received divine invitations to observe Jesus birth. God invited the shepherds in their fields. God invited the Magi as they searched the stars for answers to the meaning of life.

These foreign travelers became the first outsiders to the Faith to witness this Messiah, the Savior of the world, because God chose to meet them where they were in their journey of life. It is not an accident that Matthew, who was Jewish and was writing primarily to a Jewish audience, includes this part of the story that the other gospels leave out. Matthew wants to make the point that even though Jesus was born as the son of David in the city of David; he came for far more than just the Jewish branch of God's family tree. Jesus came not only for the poorest Jewish citizens like shepherds, but for the richest Gentile dignitaries. He came for people of every race of every nationality. Just as God reached out to a nation of people who valued genealogies by having Jesus born to a woman and man of the house of David in the city of David, so God reached out to people who studied the stars through a star.

Many people begin their search for God through nature. The sight of an awesome mountain or a cascading falls or a grand canyon can put us in our place. The terrible destruction of a hurricane can remind us of our mortality and what really matters. God's revelation through nature can bring us to the general vicinity, but it is God's revelation through scripture that points us to the specific vicinity.

Nature told the magi to head for Jerusalem, but scripture sent them to Bethlehem. The magi worshipped nature, but when nature led them to the land of the scripture it was the scriptures that led them to the right house and to their knees.

The Magi represent the first Gentile worshipers of Jesus, and they represent the future Gentiles that would come to accept the Kingship of Jesus. They are the reason we celebrate Epiphany. This is the message of the magi. I am not Jewish. But because of Jesus we non-Jews can be grafted into God's family tree. We can acknowledge Christ's Kingship, his priestly offering of himself. We, too, can bow before him in adoration and praise. This is the message of the Magi. Isaiah predicted a light would shine, a light to the Gentiles.

The Magi's search represents all those who were not born into the Jewish part of the Family of God. We too, no matter what the circumstances of our heritage, are among those who have searched and come to worship Christ. There's room in the family of God for people like us.

Jesus didn't come for one select group. It is not just for the "in" crowd. It is not just for those who think and have all the answers. It is not just for the religious elite. It is for everybody! Gentile and Jews! Men and women! Boys and girls! Red Brown Yellow Black and White ALL are precious in God's sight. This is the message of the magi.

The magi entered in the house where Jesus was and bowed in reverence, and presented presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Each gift foreshadowed one aspect of Jesus' ministry. The gold was fit for a king. The frankincense alluded to the priestly role he would fulfill as the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. The myrrh was a foreshadowing of his death like the prophets before him who were killed for speaking truth to power.

Some people inch their way to Jesus, starting in early childhood. Others undergo a dramatic experience later in life, so that all of who they are is transformed. Whoever these magi were, they show us that we can never predict how God will bring people to Jesus.

This morning we're invited to search like the magi. I don't know what you've come seeking this morning. I don't know what it is that might be troubling your heart. But know this, God is in this place and God will meet you where you are. So as you come this morning to the Table, make that short walk the next leg on your journey of faith like the shepherds and the magi.

Leave what is troubling you behind. Leave the hurt and the pain caused by others. Leave the guilt of your sin. Leave all of that behind. Lay your gifts, your lives, your offerings before Jesus.

When the magi found the newborn king they offered him gifts, gifts that represented the best that was in them. This is the kind of vision the kind of revelation we need as we begin this New Year--a vision to build new lives to grow God's family to reach our world.

This morning we will ordain Myrna Dunnam to the office of elder. We will install her as well as Jeremy Garrett, Ann Reilly and Tony Traylor. They bring their gifts to their office. You don't have to be an elder though to bring your gifts to bear. God needs all of us to use what God has given us.

Epiphany is seeing life with new eyes. It is seeing new possibilities. It is not making resolutions but seeking revelations of what God is calling us to become. Pray for me and I will pray for you that this year we will all discover a greater depth to our faith, a greater breadth to our witness and a greater spring in our step.

I want to challenge us today to deeper in our faith. I want to challenge us to spend more time in prayer, to focus more intently in worship on God's purpose for our lives. I want to challenge us to make good use of what we know of God from God's creation and what we know of God from God's word.

The scripture tells us that the Magi were warned in a dream not to go to Herod to tell him where they found the new king. They went home a different way. So too, as we leave today we will go home a different way. We will go home changed by our encounter with Christ and go home changed by the ... message of the magi.

Let us Pray, Dear Lord, we thank you that through the gift of Jesus you have given us a glimpse into your plan of salvation for people of every nation, He shows us how you bring hope of justice to those in need and deliverance to captives. In him we see the promise of new life if we follow his guidance for our lives. Let your all-encompassing presence be with those who, for whatever reasons are in need of your loving care. Help them sense your healing power at work to ease their pain, shield them from the powers of this world that seek to undermine their spirits and protect them from any aggravation that might weaken them further.

We particularly pray for those in institutions who seem to be forgotten, those disturbed in mind and spirit. Bring wholeness to them and a sense of your companionship in the midst of their loneliness. Let us not cast aside any who dwell among us, whether they be the simple, the slow, or the impaired. Rather, help us to see in them a special gleam of the light of Christ.

We pray for those on our hearts this morning, especially for those we know who are ill and struggling. May they and we all know the peace that passes understanding, and may it guide and guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus in whose name we pray. Amen.