

January 4, 2025
The Feast of the Epiphany (*anticipated*)
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, Rector

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12f

In the Name of God, whose coming we adore. Amen.

In 1927, St. Louis native Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote this about the coming of the Magi: “A cold coming we had of it, just the worst time of the year for a journey, and such a long journey. The ways deep and the weather sharp, the very dead of winter.”¹ As part of his genius, Eliot recognized good source material – in this case, a sermon that had been preached three centuries earlier.

On Christmas Day in 1622 (it was a Wednesday), the Bishop of Winchester, Lancelot Andrewes, preached to the Christmas Court of King James I (yes, the King James Version King James) about the visit of the Magi. Andrewes was imagining what it was like to have been one of those travelers, following a star through rough and dangerous terrain, and to who knows where.

As we gather today on the doorstep of the Feast of the Epiphany, we might ask, just who were these Wise Ones, whose figures have finally found their place in our crèche? Why do they so capture our imagination?

The writer of Matthew’s gospel is the only one to mention the Wise Ones, or the Magi. Matthew tells us that they came “from the east” (literally, *ἀπό ανατολῶν* “from the rising”) in “the days of Herod the King” to worship the one who had “been born the king of the Jews.”

The gospel never mentions the number of Magi, but many Christians have assumed them to have been three, based on the number of gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. In some traditions of the Christian East, there are as many as twelve magi.

¹ The opening lines of T.S Eliot’s *The Journey of the Magi* (1927, the first of his *Ariel* poems) are borrowed directly from Lancelot Andrewes’ Sermon on Mt. 2:1-2, preached in the presence of James I on Christmas 1622. (Andrewes had preached on the same text in 1620). “It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in ‘the very dead of winter.’ And these difficulties they overcame, of a wearisome, dangerous, unseasonable journey; and for all this they came.”

Although the Magi are commonly referred to as “kings,” there is nothing in Matthew’s account that implies that they were rulers of any kind. Calling these visitors kings is linked to Old Testament passages describing kings worshipping the Messiah, especially Psalm 72: “The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts” (Ps 72:10).

When the biblical text gives us few details, as is the case of the Magi, we tend to elaborate. Different traditions have given them a wide range of names. We know them as Melchior, Caspar and Balthasar.

Then, there’s the question of where they came from. The same country? Different places? Foreign, certainly. Perhaps even exotic. In an Armenian tradition, Balthasar comes from Arabia, Melchior from Persia, and Caspar from India.

What seems most important to Matthew is that God was revealing the birth of Jesus to the wider world, to the lands beyond the people of Israel.

Where, then, do you find yourself in this tale of exotic strangers who are searching for something far from home? A tale in which the star serves both as lure and as flashlight. Around the year 100, Ignatius of Antioch wrote: “A star shone in heaven brighter than all the stars / and its light was indescribable / and its newness caused amazement.”²

The amazement over that new star compelled the Magi to journey into and across the unknown. They were searching for a King, and the star led them beyond an earthly king (Herod) to a baby in a stable. And, finding the one they sought, they fell down and worshiped him with the posture of their bodies and with their gifts.

How might God be calling you? Left to your own devices, what star might compel you to search for, and come to worship, Emmanuel, God-with-Us, born anew in a place least expected? We are probably not called, like the Magi, to journey, as Andrewes describes it, “many a hundred miles … through deserts, all the way waste and desolate [*on a journey that*] was exceeding dangerous, through the midst of thieves and cut-throats.”³

But we, too, live in a world filled with waste, desolation, and danger. We live in a world where, despite ongoing attempts at erasure, memories of the Capitol riots of January 6, 2021 are still searingly fresh. I imagine that our news feeds this week will be flooded with images of hundreds of people enacting a hellish funhouse version of the God-seeking Magi and a frightened and power-seeking Herod.

² Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* xix.

³ Andrewes, 1622.

But we are, all of us, called to follow the light of the star that leads us beyond the glittering immediacy of worldly bling, or political power of any stripe, to the place where the Incarnate God of Truth, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lies within the heart of each human person. And we, like the Magi, are warned to resist Herod's machinations and return home by another road.

In these days that we celebrate the Epiphany, the appearance of God moving into the neighborhood, I invite you to think about the star both as a searchlight in the distance to lure you to an unknown destination, and a flashlight to illumine the path. Perhaps the star leads you speak up for the humanity of every human person, protesting and resisting actions by government and/or society that seek to dehumanize other children of God. Perhaps you are drawn to seek out those whom the world has cast aside and who flail about in loneliness, or poverty, or hunger, or addiction or any other dis-ease. Perhaps the star might lead you to see God Incarnate in someone from whom you have long been estranged – even if that person is the one you see in the mirror.

Like the Magi, open the eyes of your heart to see where the star is calling you, and trust that that same star will light the way. [The image that shines is my head this morning is the blessing that Mary Ellen Anderson constantly bestowed on (at least) her children: *God go with you all the way; all the way; all the way.*]

The world tells us that stargazing is fanciful, even foolish. But, to return to our friend Lancelot Andrewes, "the wise men were never any less wise for coming; in fact, to come to Christ is one the wisest things that these wise men ever did. And if they and we are wise in one Spirit, we will follow the same star, tread the same way, and so come at last where they have happily gone before us... and remain with him forever, Jesus Christ the Righteous."⁴

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On Tuesday, the Feast of Epiphany will bring the Twelve Days of Christmas to a close. Many of us (I, anyway) will begin to undecorate our homes. The lectionary will shift our focus to the work of God in Jesus in the world. In the coming weeks, we will hear Matthew's accounts of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan, the call of the Disciples, and his ministry of teaching.

As we anticipate those stories over the next several weeks, I want to call to mind the wisdom of Howard Thurman. His famous poem, *The Work of Christmas*, was published after his death, and reminds us of the life and work to which the star calls us all.

⁴ Andrewes, Christmas 1620, paraphrase mine.

The Work of Christmas (1985, posthumous)

When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To teach the nations
To bring Christ to all
To make music in the heart.

~ *Howard Thurman (1899-1981)*

But, as we prepare to turn our hearts to the work of Christmas, let's allow ourselves one last little bit of Christmas fun, shall we? As a way to remember the journey of the Magi throughout the year, we can mark the doors of our homes, the starting point of every journey.

Door Blessing to follow.