

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matt. 2:1-2)

Matthew is the only gospel that describes the wise men, the Magi coming to the Christ child in Bethlehem. The term in Greek for the 'wise men' is Magi, which connotes Persian religious scholars, who also knew astrology and had knowledge about interpreting dreams. They were from Persia, the country of Cyrus who had liberated the Jews from the Babylonian captivity in 535 B.C. and allowed them to rebuild Jerusalem.¹ So Matthew's Jewish faith community would have known about Persia and its religion of Zoroastrianism. Having wise men from the East coming to Jerusalem would have probably evoked images of liberation from Babylonian oppression. The birth of Jesus was a fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and also the fulfillment of Persian prophecies that looked for a prophet born of a virgin.²

So Matthew has wise men, magi, coming to Jerusalem *asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."* (Matt 2:2) The light of Christ has been seen by those who are seeking the will of God, even in other lands. They come bringing gifts to offer the one who's radiance they have glimpsed. Notice that when the wise men come to inquire where the child is to be found, Herod, the political ruler of Jerusalem hasn't noticed the star, the divine light, he has to ask his advisors about it. Herod's advisors are the ones who quote the Jewish scriptures. Herod then tells the wise men to go to Bethlehem to find the child. It is not until they start towards Bethlehem that they observe the star once again. The light of Christ then stops over the house where Jesus is found. *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.* (Matt 2:11) As Isaiah wrote, *then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice.* (Isaiah 60:5)

The word Epiphany means a manifestation of a divine being. It can also mean an illuminating discovery or realization. The wise men from Persia have had an epiphany, they realize that Jesus is the fulfillment of their own religious prophecies and they open their treasure chests and offer him gold, frankincense and myrrh. They offer the treasures that they have to the Christ child. Just as Isaiah said, *they shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.* (Isaiah 60:6) They bring what is precious to the Christ child. Gold symbolized a king, frankincense was a symbol of divinity as well as being used for healing and myrrh was used burial. Here was the child that would be King over all, manifest God's love and healing to the world, while myrrh anticipates his death. The idea that there are three men comes from the three gifts that are offered in homage to the Christ child.

The magi in their spiritual quest were open to the manifestation of the divine in the world

¹ Working Preacher, 1/2/19, <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

² Ibid.

and risking their own safety, went where the radiance of God's light directed them. To a house in Bethlehem where they found a mother and her child awaiting them. Then opening their treasure chests, they offered the Christ child the gifts that they had brought with them. What are the gifts that we are to bring forth from our treasure chests this year to present to the Christ child? Many of us have made a financial commitment for this coming year for the ministry of this faith community. But besides giving monetarily for the building up of God's kingdom in this neighborhood, what are the other gifts that you can offer from your treasure chest. The treasure chest of gifts that God has given to each one of us as unique individuals who radiate the love of God to our world. God has given each of us unique talents and abilities. We are called to share our gifts, not to hide them under a bushel. *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* (Matt. 5:16) We are to be alive with the fire of God's love streaming through us to the world! As Catherine of Siena wrote, "be who you were created to be and set the world on fire!" Our faith community exists because each person here takes responsibility to live out their faith in their daily lives and to support the ministry of this church. We have caregivers, engineers, teachers, nurses, lawyers and book keepers in our midst! Together we are rich in talents and abilities. By being open to sharing our gifts with others we can form partnerships for ministry in our neighborhood.

By taking risks as the wise men did on their journey to Christ, our Lord will lead us into new ways of being church that we have not even considered. This coming year will bring us new challenges and opportunities to serve those in need both within and outside our church doors with the gifts that we have to offer.

Notice that the wise men from the East were warned in a dream to not return to Herod. The political power of the day would not understand what they had discovered in the house in Bethlehem. So they departed by another way that God showed them in a dream. God will provide us with God's dream for how to use our gifts, how to grow as Christ the King in this coming year. Ask God for a dream, what is the path that God has in mind for our church and our neighborhood that needs to hear and see God's love active in our midst. We are to share our dreams with each other, to discern God's desire for us in this coming year.

The poet Howard Thurman wrote about what is to happen when the angels have left and the wise men have returned to their homes. When the dazzling light is not so bright.

The Mood of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock

The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,

To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

The work of Christmas is to follow the way of Jesus. To open our treasure chests and bring forth the gifts that God has given us to proclaim God's love to our world. To bring peace among people and to make the music of the spheres resonate in our hearts.