

Day of Epiphany, Year A  
The Very Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
January 6, 2023  
Isaiah 42:1-9  
Psalm 29  
Acts 10:34-43  
Matthew 3:13-17

## **Magnificent, Magnanimous Magi**

So, the magi. The magnificent, magnanimous magi. They are *magnificent* because they pursue excellence and are excellent at what they do. They are *magnanimous* because they are generous in what and how they give and in how they show up.

There were at least two of them because a plural noun is used for them. At least two, but we don't know how many in total there were. Traditionally, we have been told by art, literature, and tradition there were three of them because they brought three gifts to the infant Jesus. But it's possible that their entourage was quite large.

Much has been made of the symbolism of their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 'Round here we use brass and silver more than gold. And to my knowledge, we don't use myrrh. But frankincense. Well, take a deep breath. We use that gift of the magi at least once a week. And some of us just can't get quite enough of it.

Much has been conjectured regarding their status and training and expertise. Were they astrologers, astronomers, kings, priests, court jesters, some combination of some or all of these? It's difficult to state exactly who they were based on the information we have.

But here are some things we do know: they were not Jews. They were not from Palestine. They did not live nearby. They were Gentiles, which means all the other people who were not Jews, people of other nations, from far away. When they came in search of Jesus, they undertook an intentional, international, inter-religious journey. Matthew is telling us that before there was any such thing as Christianity, before the Jesus movement even got going, people from other places and other religious traditions were interested in who Jesus was and interested in encountering him.

We can lose the enduring value of the story of the magi if we try to pin down all the historical details, to explain the story, or to explain it away. The visit of the magi and the details of their journey are not from a newspaper account. This story is not an allegory or a fable. It is a rather story that tells us of the first encounter of

Gentiles with Jesus. It is the first revelation of Christ to the people of the other nations of the world. It is their story, and it is our story.

In the words of New Testament scholar Annette Metz, the written sources about Jesus are not merely historical fact and not merely literary fiction. They combine a variety of things. They contain what Dr Metz calls “refracted memory,” and their intertextuality is rich,<sup>1</sup> which means these different texts about Jesus, especially the gospels, are in conversation with one another and with earlier texts, like the books of the prophets as we just heard in our gospel, a quotation from the prophet Isaiah. They quote one another and allude to one another and sometimes riff on one another.

It isn’t necessary to know or understand every detail to benefit from these texts and the stories they bring us. Every detail may not be factual, and yet, we know deep in our bones these stories are true. They tell the truth, and they invite us in.

Like a spiral these stories keep coming around each year. And every time they have something to say to us. Maybe something we’ve never heard before; maybe something we couldn’t have heard before.

The magi, who identify the baby Jesus as the one born king of the Jews, come a very long way across the desert, a thousand miles or more, most likely from Persia, now Iran, to the holy city of the Jews, Jerusalem. It’s a journey that takes a long time. By the time they arrive, the word Matthew uses to describe Jesus doesn’t mean tiny baby but rather young child.

In Jerusalem they inquire about the baby in the place that seems like the right one to go to, the palace of the current ruler of the Jews. They look in the logical place, but it isn’t the correct place. It isn’t the location of the person they are seeking but rather of someone who is quite threatened to learn of his existence.

They consult with experts more familiar with local sources and wisdom. Where is the predicted birthplace of Messiah, who is to be king of the Jews? Bethlehem of Judea, hometown of King David, tiny little village south of Jerusalem whose name means “house of bread.”

---

<sup>1</sup>Kremer, Richard L., Peter Barthel, and George H. van Kooten. *Isis* 108, no. 2 (2017): 421–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26456164>.

Everyone isn't looking for the same thing, not then, not now. The magi are looking for this new king because they want to pay him homage, to pay their respects and offer worship. King Herod tries to hijack their search effort because he is looking for a way to get rid of this new rival to his throne.

With the benefit of local knowledge, the magi are successful in their quest. They keep following the star that has led them across a vast expanse until it stops at last. Their joy is tremendous. They enter the house and find Jesus and Mary. They worship this different kind of ruler, this long-awaited deliverer. They present the gifts they have brought from far away.

They find what they are looking for because they look in the right place—not the logical place, not the place everybody knows, but the *right* place. Real power, real life isn't always in the places of formal authority. They find what they are looking for even though it is not where they expect to find it.

The truth of their story for us is that if we search diligently as they did, we will find what we are seeking. It may not be in the place we have imagined it should be. It may not be in the form we have conceptualized it ought to be. But what we seek can be sought, and it can be found. We will find what we are looking for, even if it is not what we expected.

When they reach their destination and find what they seek, their journey is only halfway through. Like anyone on any pilgrimage, upon reaching the place to which they journey, they must return home. They receive a word of knowledge through a dream. And they realize, *What got us here won't get us there.*

The route that got them to Bethlehem won't get them home safe and sound. To survive, to thrive, they return by a different road. They model for us not only earnest seeking for Emmanuel, God with us, but also the wisdom of altering course when divinely guided. I want to join their entourage, be part of their posse. How about you?

In Advent we pondered how to prepare for the coming of Christ. In Christmastide we celebrated and welcomed the coming of Christ. In Epiphany season which starts today, we figure out how to live Christmas in this season and all the seasons, how to do the work of Christmas incarnating the good news of Emmanuel, God with us. How will we do that this season and this year in this place. People are still interested in encountering that Love.

On this day and in this Epiphany season God is calling each of us to join the ranks of the magnificent, magnanimous magi. To watch for signs of a new thing God is doing. To journey with intention. To pursue excellence. To give generously. To alter course as needed. To travel together. To live the truth of the story of Love.