



“Have You Changed?”

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Matt. 2:1–12 (NRSV)***

On the surface of it, today’s gospel reading is as familiar as virtually any part of the Christmas story or the Bible is for most of us, and yet its meaning may elude us.

The story of Jesus’ life depicts these changes, beginning with his birth narrative, which is depicted in today’s gospel lesson for the feast of epiphany on January 6. First, I’ll explain about the birth narrative, and then I’ll invite us to reflect on our context, life circumstances, and choices about change in our lives.

The Epiphany story (in our minds and cultures) is actually an embellishment of the story that we find in any one of the gospels.

There is, for example, no stable, no shepherds and no sheep in Matthew’s Christmas pageant. There is, however, a house that is visited by an undetermined number of wise men who bring strange gifts that only a first century king would value, especially the frankincense and myrrh.

The Christmas and Epiphany stories that exist in our consciousness and cultures are a conflation of Luke’s and Matthew’s stories about the birth of Christ, the Old Testament prophecies such as the reading from Isaiah 60 featured in today’s Call to Worship, and a series of folk traditions and carols passed down for hundreds—and in some cases—thousands of years.

II

“So where did the three kings come from?” we may ask.

The idea in our minds that there were three Eastern royals traveling to Bethlehem comes to us from the lyrics of the carol, “We Three Kings.”

And where did the composer of the carol get the kings?

One New Testament scholar explains that the number of magi (i.e., three) was extrapolated from the number of gifts described in today's gospel reading.¹

Eventually, through folk traditions, the three gift-givers were ascribed royal identities, most likely as a result of Jesus' birth narrative being seen as the answer to Old Testament prophecies such as: Isaiah 60:3,² Ps. 72:10-11,³ and Philemon 2:10-11⁴ that make reference to all nations bowing to the Messiah. A similar reference is repeated in Matthew's gospel, which identifies Jesus as messiah for Israel and for all nations.

The wordsmiths among us will appreciate that the Greek term for the visitors, which is *magoi*, may be translated into English in a variety of ways including the following: "wise men," "astrologers," and "magicians."⁵

Most theologians accept "astrologers" as the best translation, basing their views on historical data from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, which reveals that astrology originated in Persia or Babylonia and India, and that Eastern astrologers were proto-astronomers, who studied the stars and who created, read, and interpreted star charts.⁶

While many historians debate the identity and historicity of the magi, most biblical scholars view the magi as Gentiles, whose identities in Matthew's gospel served as a literary and theological device indicating that Jesus had a Gentile following from birth.⁷

In other words, Jesus was more than a Jewish prophet; he had international appeal. He was King of Kings. He came for every person and nation.

The names and geographic origins of the magi were likely embellished over time through folk traditions, until eventually each royal visitor acquired a specific name and origin: Melchior, King of Persia; Gaspar, King of India; and Balthazar, King of Arabia.⁸ This is another way in which the folk stories illustrate the idea that Jesus came for all nations.

III

In a manner similar to the three visitors' identities, the three gifts acquired increasingly new layers of meaning over time—meaning which came to have theological

¹ Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew* in "Interpretation: A Bible Commentary," (Nashville: John Knox Press, 1993) p. 13. C.f., Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), p. 16.

²"And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

³ "May the kings of Tarshis and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." Boring and Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, p. 16. Biblical quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁴ Phil. 2:10-11. "...every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

⁵ M. Eugene Boring, "Commentary on Matthew," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 140.

⁶ Boring and Craddock, p. 16.

⁷ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus' Birth* (New York: Harper One, 2007), p. 144.

⁸ Hare, p. 13.

significance. The royal gifts included gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were strange gifts by present-day standards, but they were precious gifts by ancient standards, and considered symbols of wealth and religious and political power.⁹

Gold, as in every generation, was a luxury and a measure of wealth.

Myrrh was bitter, perfumed oil used as incense by Temple priests, and for the healing and anointing of sick and penitent persons. It was also an expensive burial spice,¹⁰ which in the context of Jesus' birth narrative foreshadows his crucifixion and death.¹¹ The doom and gloom to which myrrh alludes is spelled out in the fourth verse of "We Three Kings."

The third gift was frankincense, a precious, fragrant resin harvested from rare trees grown in the Middle East, and used only in the sanctuary by the high priests. This gift symbolized Jesus' role as a High Priest in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹²

A modern critique of these gifts and gift-givers, and their meanings, has been passed around churches for more than a decade. The question was raised:

"What if the Three Wise Men were women?"

Answer:

They would have asked directions,
arrived on time,
helped deliver the baby,
cleaned the stable,
made a casserole,
and brought practical gifts.

IV

The way that modern Christians celebrate Epiphany varies depending upon cultural identity. In England, for example, three cakes (one for each king) are baked and shared among revelers. Before the cakes are put in the oven, the baker secretly stirs a dried bean into one of the three cake pans. Whoever finds the bean in her or his slice of cake receives a special prize.

Many Latin American cultures celebrate Three Kings Day with church and family gatherings, where special food is served, gifts are given, games are played, and in Mexico, a piñata is broken.

⁹ Hare, p. 14.

¹⁰ In John's account of Holy Week, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial.

¹¹ Hare, p. 14.

¹² Hare, p. 14.

Filipino Christians focus on the meaning of Jesus' birth during Epiphany. Filipino Roman Catholics, in particular, celebrate the Feast of the Santo Niño (the Feast of the Holy Baby Jesus) during this season.

Some years ago when I was on a mission trip with college students from my church in Boston, we were blessed to participate in a Santo Niño festival in Cebu City. The celebration included a huge parade, street fairs, party music, face painting, and street revelry that seemed like a cross between the Rose Bowl Parade in Pasadena and Carnival in Rio de Janeiro! The face paint, in particular, got a little wild. I have a great photo of our kids covered in grease paint and looking like surreal Native Americans ready to go on the war path.

In Germany, children go from house to house on Epiphany eve, singing carols and chalking the year and initials KMB (Kaspar, Melchior and Balthasar) near the entrance of each home. The festive *Dreikonigskuchen* or Three Kings Cake is also served on Epiphany eve to celebrate this occasion.

Most of the rest of Northern Europe downplay the magi stories during Epiphany in favor of stories about Jesus' baptism, because those churches historically have chosen to focus on the meanings of a different part of Jesus' life. In these churches, infants and believers are baptized on the Feast of Epiphany, and congregants are invited to renew their baptisms. That renewal invitation often comes with a sprinkling of water for the entire congregation by the priest or pastor as she moves about the sanctuary shouting, "Renew your baptism!" As American Protestants of Northern European descent we have inherited this emphasis on the birth and baptism of Jesus, rather than the story of the Three Kings.

V

So this story and its meanings have changed, and it is celebrated in different ways cross-culturally. So have the ways that Christians have interpreted this story and its significance in our lives. One could (and generations of preachers have) delivered numerous sermons on this topic.

As a child, I was fascinated by the magi and their mysterious origins and gifts. As a young adult, these three seekers were a source of inspiration for informed spiritual inquiry. As a pastor, I am most interested in how the Magi were changed, and how, in turn any of us may be changed by our encounter with them, with the incarnate Christ, and with the new paths that we may pursue as a result of these encounters.

I wonder, now, how this ancient story and its peculiar characters have touched you and your life, and what new directions you find yourself pursuing this Epiphany season. So I leave you with this question to ponder as you travel home, perhaps, like the magi, by a different route.