

Sacred Gifts

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,
because from you will come one who governs,
who will shepherd my people Israel."

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

Mt. 2:1-12 (C.E.B.)

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, even though Friday was the actual date of the celebration. It is an ancient Christian celebration, dating at least as far back as the 300's. It was first celebrated in the eastern church as a part of Christmas, and in some places the celebration was seen as more important than Christmas. It was a celebration of the recognition of the incarnation, when God came to dwell among us.

(Now, to be clear, the Orthodox celebration of Christmas this weekend reflects a difference in calendars, not a difference in the understanding of Christmas versus Epiphany. Orthodox Epiphany will come in a couple of weeks.)

The word Epiphany comes to us almost directly from two Greek words, "epi," meaning 'on' or 'upon' and "phaneros," which means 'visible,' or 'seen.' Epi phaneros. Epiphany. Literally it means to "show up," although most people would say it means to be recognized. I usually say it means "aha" (*with a slap to the forehead*), like a light bulb that goes on (or shows up) when you recognize something that has been there all along.

The star 'shows up' so the Magi can make their journey and they, in turn, 'show up' to find Jesus, to recognize who he is. And I like to think the star continues to 'show up' in our lives, especially when we 'show up' to find Jesus.

It's why I have stars for you that I'll tell you about later. They are your own epiphany stars.

We don't have any corroborating evidence of the visit of the Magi, by the way. We don't know how many there are, either. Tradition has settled on three, based primarily on the number of gifts. But there were stories of six and up to seventeen Magi who were a part of this entourage.

Can you imagine the commotion 17 Magi would have caused? The truth is we just don't know that much about them.

We do have stories about Herod, however.¹ We know that he was a ruthless man who killed his own sons because he thought they might usurp his authority to rule. He was a man so jealous of his power he had no room for anyone who might question him. So, when the Magi come to pay honor to the newborn King, he is taken aback. Well, actually, he is probably fuming mad; but he controls his temper long enough to ask them to let him know where they find this child so he can honor the newborn King as well (Mt. 2:8).

He says he wants to “show up,” but anyone who knows the stories of Herod knows that will never happen. He has already made up his mind about the child. He sees this “son of David” as a very real threat since Herod himself is not a descendant of David and really has no right to claim the title King.

As it turns out, the Magi have also made up their minds about Jesus. They made up their minds before setting out on their journey. But, since the Magi are not from around here, they assume the king may be the father of this child, so they go to his house first. They clearly don’t know what kind of a man Herod is. Nor do they realize the jeopardy they are putting the Holy Family in – at least not they are advised to go home by a different route (Mt. 2:12).

We may not be able to corroborate the story of the Magi, but it is a believable story. I mean we know foreign dignitaries always bring gifts whenever they meet with leaders of other nations. The King of Tyre brought gifts to David, for example (2 Sam. 5:11). And the Queen of Sheba brought gifts to Solomon (1 Kgs. 10:2). It is no surprise the Magi would bring gifts.

There has been lots of conjecture about the gifts they bring. Some have suggested a symbolic role for each of the gifts, so that one represents the royalty of Jesus, another the sacred calling of the prophet, and still another to points toward the priestly role of Jesus. Others suggest one is for his life, one is for his death, and one is for his resurrection. And you can easily get lost in the arguments for each. You can even ask what Jesus did with his gifts.

More recently, people have made jokes about how if the Magi were women they would bring gifts that are more appropriate, maybe diapers and formula and food. My own guess is that at least one of them *was* a woman – because she convinced them to stop and ask for directions.

But I think when we focus on the gifts, or even the gift-givers, we are asking the wrong question.

The Magi come from far away to honor the newborn King while the ruling King refuses to do so. In fact, Herod destroys the lives of families and children rather than honoring anyone (Mt. 2:16). The question becomes whether, or not we will honor Christ. Will we be more like the Magi or more like the King?

And it might be easy to sit in our pews at church or in our recliners at home and say we’re more like the Magi than Herod. But the answer may not be that cut and dry.

Consider the gifts, for a moment.

I know we all spent time making lists and purchasing gifts for family members at Christmas. Some of us planned well enough in advance to have them shipped across the country or even around the world so they arrived on time. That takes a certain amount of planning, a certain amount of forethought. It’s part of expressing love when we honor someone with that kind of intentionality.

¹ One source of stories are the writings of Josephus.

But the Magi bought precious gifts and *hand delivered* them. They left behind their families and their work. They went on an adventure without any real sense of the destination (Mt. 2:2). They simply packed up their gifts and left. The story suggests they saw the star when he was born but may not have arrived until he was two or three years old (Mt. 2:2, 16)!

How many of us are willing to make that kind of a journey to honor someone?

It might be easy to say, “Well, at least I’m not like Herod.”

Michael Slaughter wrote a book a few years ago, based on a sermon series and campaign he continues to hold at the Ginghamburg United Methodist Church in Tipp City, Ohio. I no longer have a copy, but the book’s title says everything you need to know about it. ***Christmas is Not Your Birthday*** (Abingdon, 2011).

Slaughter invites people to look at how they spend their holiday budget. He encourages people to give at least the same amount to the church. (Actually, he suggests that people cut their budget in half so they can give an equal amount to charity without changing their overall budget.)

He reminds me of the couple I met some thirty years ago now. They were leading a workshop at a Continuing Education event I attended. This couple had left the high paced energy of the work ‘rat race’ to make a living off the land. They had a small shop where they sold their produce and other items they made. One part of their financial support came through their pottery sales.

The wife made the pottery and priced the pottery; the husband put them on display.

One pot, however, was hard to price. I no longer remember if she described a mug or a vase or some other vessel. I remember the wife saying she somehow felt invested in it. But the agreement was that they would sell her wares. So, against her husband’s protests, she put it on the shelf without a price tag.

A customer came in and was intrigued by that pot. She asked how much it cost. The husband didn’t know. So, he sent the customer to his wife who said, “I can’t really put a price on it because a part of me is in that pot.”

The customer insisted she would pay any price. All she had to do was name a price. After considering her offer, the potter said, “I tell you what. I will trade it for something you have that is a part of you.”

With that, the customer began to wander the store a little as she contemplated the offer. She came back with tears in her eyes. “You don’t know what you’ve done,” she said. “You’ve made me realize that all I have is my money.”

The Magi were willing to give something of themselves to the Christ child. They brought expensive gifts, gifts they chose before they left their homes, gifts they brought with them over a long and arduous journey. They may not have invested their lives in making the gifts, but they invested themselves in delivering it, in showing up.

It reminds me of the woman who watched her dad on Sunday mornings when she was growing up. Every week, while the family was getting dressed for church, he would take out a check, fill it out, and bring it to church to be placed in the offering plate. The amount of the check did not make a difference to this woman. It was the intentional decision to give that struck her.

I don’t know how many of us make that kind of an intentional effort. I do know some of us have money taken out of our account every month so we no longer have to think about it.

Contrast that with Herod. Not only did he refuse to give a gift he also wanted to keep all he had, including his throne. He didn't even care about the children and the infants in his kingdom!

We may not think that's our story. Until we hear people like Michael Slaughter ask whose birthday we celebrated two weeks ago. Or until we realize we have already decided how much room we will make in our lives for this Christ child. Or until we remember how our society prefers to spend money on the military rather than child care, or how our taxes support a prison system rather than mental health care for those living in poverty. Or until we consider how little effort we make to grow in our faith.

When I first began studying this text for today, I was struck by the word I remembered from translations I had heard in the past. Homage. I remembered that the Magi paid homage to the child and that Herod feigned a desire to pay homage himself. In the end, only the Magi do so (Mt. 2:11). I wondered what that word homage means? One translation uses the word honor.

The question then becomes, how do we intend to honor Christ today? How do we intend to honor him this week?

Will we bring a sacred gift? Or will we offer our lives? Will we make a commitment to serve or a commitment to learn or a commitment to give or some combination of those?

In the coming weeks, some of you will be asked to serve on a search committee. Maybe you will honor Christ by saying yes.

Today we are called to do more than just show up. We are asked to present our gifts in response to the gift that God has presented to us: a child who comes to reign in our hearts. The most precious gift of all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

The Magi followed the star to find Jesus, bringing their gifts with them. We are also seeking Jesus, trusting that God can and does use many signs (including stars) to guide us closer to the Divine presence.

With that in mind, I am going to offer you a star as a sign for you to follow this year. You can pick one up on your way out of the sanctuary. They are in baskets at each of the doors. On each of the stars is a word. There are also strings available in case you want to hang it up rather than simply set it out.

For those on zoom, if you send me a note by email, I will send you a word from one of the stars not taken.

I invite you to trust the word you receive to serve as your guide, to see it as a gift and to allow that gift, that star, to become your own epiphany for the remainder of this year.

Let us pray

Thank you, God, for the gifts we have received from you, even those gifts that seem odd or awkward or strange. Help the words we receive today become an epiphany word that will bring us closer to you.

Help us be open to the gift of our star words. We acknowledge that we do not fully understand what this word might mean for our faith, but we receive it from you with gratitude and pray that your Spirit will enable us to live into our 'star word' with intention and faithfulness.

Amen.

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² I first heard of this tradition in 2018; this is my first chance to use it.

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