

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*May he have dominion from sea to sea,
 and from the River to the ends of the earth.
 May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
 bring tribute to him.
 May all kings bow down to him,
 and all nations serve him.*
 Let us worship God.

(Psalm 72.8, 10a, 11)

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty and eternal God:

As the Magi traveled to Israel to worship the young Jesus, we too take time apart to worship you on this first day of the week. We continue our celebration of Jesus' coming into the world, as we commemorate today his manifestation to Gentiles. We give you thanks that your love embraces all people of the world, not just some; and we pray that our own love may be equally all-embracing.

We confess, however, that we tend to be selective about the people we care about, and that we too easily disregard the interests of those who fall outside our own circles of care. We allow ourselves to be influenced by ethnic and racial prejudices, which motivate us to treat people different from ourselves with callousness or outright nastiness.

We confess that we have sinned, gracious God; and we ask for your forgiveness. More than that, we ask you to transform our attitudes, through the influence of the Holy Spirit, so that we may recognize the equality of all people, and may treat all people with the same respect and consideration, regardless of what they look like, or where they come from.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, and we pray *together*, now, as he taught us:

*Our Father, which art in heaven:
 Hallowed be thy name.
 Thy kingdom come.
 Thy will be done in earth,
 as it is in heaven.
 Give us this day our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 as we forgive our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 but deliver us from evil;
 for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
 for ever. Amen.*

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

This is a trustworthy saying,

which deserves full acceptance:

“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.”

(1 Timothy 1.15)

*In him, we have redemption, through his blood —
the forgiveness of sins —*

in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.

(Ephesians 1.7)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

Since this is the Sunday right before Epiphany, I’ve chosen, as usual, to use the lectionary readings for **Epiphany**, rather than those for **the Second Sunday of Christmas**.

- Old Testament Reading: Isaiah 60.1-9 - “Your light has come”

This reading is a message of hope, addressed to the city of Jerusalem, in the period in which the people of Israel were returning to the city, following their exile in Babylonia.

The passage speaks of a time in the future when Jerusalem would have a place of honor in the world. It envisions people of all nations being drawn to it, bringing with them all kinds of wealth.

- Psalm: Psalm 72 - “Endow the king with your justice, God”.

Psalm 72 is a prayer for an unidentified king of Israel, asking that God would bring about his rule on earth through that king’s reign.

It may originally have been used whenever a new king was crowned. Later, though, when Israel no longer had kings of its own, the words of this psalm came to be seen as a description of a future king, called “the Messiah”. Early Christians, then, interpreted the psalm as a prophecy about Jesus.

This is the traditional psalm for Epiphany, probably because it speaks about foreign kings bringing gifts to the king of Israel. It’s probably through the influence of this psalm that people came to believe that the Magi who visited the young Jesus must have been kings.

The final three verses of the psalm are a doxology that serves as the conclusion to the second part of the Book of Psalms, which consists of Psalms 42 to 72.

- Letter Reading: Ephesians 3.2-13 - “The mystery of Christ”

In this reading, Paul writes about his ministry among Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), and about his discovery of the fact that God wishes Gentiles as well as Jews to believe in Jesus Christ, and become part of the people of God.

- Gospel Reading: Matthew 2.1-12 - The visit of the Magi

This is the story of the visit of the Magi (or “Wise Men”), which is found only in *Matthew’s* Gospel. Jesus may have been as much as two years old at the time of their visit.

SERMON:

Just over a week ago, we celebrated the first major festival of the Christian Year: Christmas. The second one, Epiphany, follows close on its heels, only twelve days later. Epiphany is always on the 6th of January, which means that, most of the time, it falls on a day other than Sunday. This year, it happens to fall on a Wednesday — this coming Wednesday, that is.

The account of the visit of the Magi in Matthew 2 has very little overlap with the account of Jesus’ birth in Luke 2, so it makes sense that there are separate festivals commemorating those two events. Nevertheless, the two events have somehow managed to get mashed together in the popular imagination. As a kid, I always thought that the visit of the Magi was part of the Christmas story. After all, nativity scenes almost always show both shepherds and Magi present at the stable where Jesus was born. Similarly, the hymn “The first nowell” depicts the shepherds looking up and seeing the same star that attracted the attention of the Magi — even though the account in Luke 2 says nothing at all about a star, and the account in Matthew 2 says nothing about an angel announcing the birth of Jesus to “certain poor shepherds”.

As I do each year, then, I’ve chosen again to save the story of the visit of the Magi for today, the Sunday right before Epiphany, rather than including it as one of the readings for our Christmas Eve service. This way, we have the chance to give the story greater attention than we would otherwise.

Even though the name “Epiphany” is probably not as familiar to us as the name “Christmas”, the Epiphany *story* is certainly well known. As a kid, I always took the story at face value, as I’m sure we all did. But as an adult, I find the story puzzling, for it raises more questions than it answers.

The most basic question, of course, is “Who were the Magi, and where did they come from?” We can’t answer this question with any certainty, because all that Matthew tells us is *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem* (Matthew 2.1) — period; full stop. In his original Greek, Matthew calls them *magoi*, which some English versions of the Bible translate as “wise men”. The Greek word *magoi* is the plural form of the word *magos*, which in other places in the New Testament is translated “magician” or “sorcerer” — that is, someone who has magical or supernatural power coming from a source other than God. In the book of Acts, for example, the apostle Paul encounters a *magos* on the island of Cyprus, during his first mission trip. However, it seems more likely that the *magoi* in the Epiphany story were astrologers, since it was a star that brought them to Israel. Although astrology was frowned upon in Israel, it was a respected combination of science and religion in other cultures.

Notice, however, that there’s no suggestion in Matthew’s account that the Magi were *kings*. The idea that they were comes from linking the Epiphany story to Psalm 72, since the psalm

speaks of foreign kings bringing tribute to the king of Israel. It says,

*May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
bring tribute to him.*

*May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.*

*May all kings bow down to him,
and all nations serve him.* (Psalm 72.10-11)

And a few verses later, we find these words:

Long may he live!

May gold from Sheba be given to him. (Psalm 72.15)

As I mentioned in introducing the psalm, when Israel no longer had kings of its own, these words came to be seen as predictions about a future king — the Messiah. Early Christians, then, saw this psalm as a predictive prophecy about Jesus. Through the influence of this interpretation, then, the Magi in the Epiphany story came to be seen to be *kings* — hence the hymn, “We three kings”, for example.

As for where the Magi came from, all Matthew says is *from the east* (2.1). East of Israel lay a vast desert; east of the desert was Babylonia, and east of Babylonia was Persia — so the Magi could have come from any of those places.

Then there are questions concerning the *star*. First of all, What was it, and what did it look like? Again, this is a question we can’t answer with certainty. Every December, astronomers come on the radio to discuss what the so-called “star of Bethlehem” may have been. They suggest a number of possibilities, such as a conjunction of bright planets, like the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that happened to take place just a couple of weeks ago. Other possibilities include an exploding star that briefly outshone all other stars; or even a comet, which would have appeared for awhile, and then disappeared again.

Without saying so directly, Matthew implies that the star must have been unusual in some way, in order to attract the attention of the Magi — such as a star that suddenly appeared where no star had been before, or a star that was brighter than any other known star. Astrologers would certainly have noticed anything in the night sky that was out of the ordinary. Although Matthew doesn’t provide any explanation about the star, I believe he himself would likely have considered it to be a *supernatural* phenomenon rather than a natural one — that is, that it was put into place by God, specifically to attract the attention of the Magi.

This leads to a further question: How did the Magi know that the star indicated that a future king had been born in Israel? Matthew gives absolutely no explanation for this. Similarly, he doesn’t give any clues as to why the Magi would’ve found it necessary to travel all the way to Israel to see this new king, and “worship” him. It appears that Matthew considered the star to have been a sign that the Magi would have understood; a sign that would have motivated them to make the trip to Israel.

One last question about the star is: How could it have led the Magi to the house where Jesus and his parents lived? Matthew says, *the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stopped over the place where the child was* (Matthew 2.9). To the modern mind, of course, this is completely impossible. Stars are such a long distance away that they can't possibly be seen to be directly over any one spot on the earth's surface, let alone a particular house. To people in ancient times, though, this may have seemed possible, since they had no concept of how far away the stars actually are.

A question that never occurred to me as a kid is, How did Herod conclude that the "king of the Jews" the Magi were searching for was the Messiah? Remember that when the Magi came looking for *the one who has been born king of the Jews* (Matthew 2.2), Herod asked the chief priests and teachers of the law *where the Messiah was to be born* (2.4). It makes perfect sense to us who know the whole story, of course; but it seems odd that Herod would immediately come to the conclusion that the young child the Magi were looking for was the Messiah. In any case, the religious leaders' answer to Herod's question — Bethlehem — serves to point the Magi in the right direction.

Another question that never occurred to me as a kid is, Why did the Magi give Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh, of all things? They seem like such odd gifts to give to a child — even useless gifts. Again, Matthew provides no explanation. Starting with Irenaeus in the Second Century, though, Christians have often interpreted the three gifts symbolically — the gold symbolizing Jesus' royal identity as the Messiah; frankincense, his divinity as the Son of God; and myrrh, his eventual death on the cross. The hymn "We three kings" follows this interpretation, as does the much older hymn "Earth has many a noble city". Whether Matthew himself saw the gifts in this way is uncertain. For him, they may have been simply gifts "fit for a king", further emphasizing Jesus' royal identity as the Messiah and a descendant of King David.

Incidentally, the gifts serve to link the Epiphany story to today's Old Testament reading, which speaks of people coming to the city of Jerusalem from Sheba,

bearing gold and incense,

and proclaiming the praise of the LORD. (Isaiah 60.6)

Because it mentions gold and incense, early Christian interpreters saw this passage also as a predictive prophecy about Jesus, although it's interesting that Matthew himself doesn't make any reference to it. Incidentally, we don't hear any more about the gifts of the Magi after this; Matthew never mentions them again.

Similarly, we hear nothing more about the Magi themselves, either. They return to their homeland, although by an alternate route, having been warned in a dream not to report back to Herod.

Even though it's a very familiar story, it's also a strange one. Astrologers from a distant country are drawn to Israel by a mysterious star, to look for someone who has been born "king of the Jews". They are led to the home of Jesus and his parents in Bethlehem. Upon finding Je-

sus, they bow down and worship him, and present him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then they leave.

What is the story's message for us, then?

For Matthew himself, I believe, the main message of the story is that it serves as further confirmation of Jesus' identity as the Messiah — something he already established in the first chapter of his Gospel. Jesus is recognized as such by foreign astrologers, but not, it would seem, by the people in charge in his own country. This foreshadows the confrontation that will take place much later in Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus is an adult.

Another message that comes out of the Epiphany story is a question: If the Magi presented Jesus with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, what should we ourselves give him? This is the question that is asked in the hymn "In the bleak mid-winter": "What can I give him?" There are many possible answers, of course, such as our faith, our love, our loyalty, and our obedience. This is a question that deserves our ongoing reflection and consideration.

A third message is suggested by the fact that the Magi were foreigners — Gentiles — who nevertheless recognized Jesus' true identity as the Messiah, and honored him as such. In this way, the Epiphany story foreshadows the early church's mission to the Gentile world — a mission in which the apostle Paul took a leading role. This is the message that the church throughout history has chosen to emphasize; and for that reason, today's reading from Ephesians, Chapter 3, is one of the traditional supporting readings for Epiphany.

In this reading, Paul argues that it has been God's plan all along to extend his blessing to the people of the world beyond just the people of Israel. He argues that this plan has been a secret or a "mystery", which has been made known only in Paul's own time. And so, he says, *This mystery is that, through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* (Ephesians 3.6). Gentiles were no longer to be considered outsiders to the people of God, then. Rather, they were to be seen as potential insiders — that, by believing in Jesus, they were just as eligible to belong to the people of God as the people of Israel were.

This, too, foreshadows something that will happen later on in Matthew's Gospel. At the very end of the book, the risen Jesus will commission his disciples by saying, *Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you* (Matthew 28.19-20).

"Make disciples of all nations". Jesus' original disciples and followers were to resist the temptation to stick to their own kind, then, and to get the message about Jesus out into the international community. The community of God's people was to be an international, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-racial community.

This remains a challenge for the church today: to reach out not just to people like ourselves, but also to people different from ourselves — people whom God loves every bit as much as he

loves us. No doubt, this is something we as a congregation will have to think about and act on as we make our way further through the New Beginnings process. At the very least, it requires each of us to evaluate any negative attitudes we may have about people of other races, ethnicities, languages, and cultures. There is no room in the Christian church for xenophobia, bigotry, or racism. Human beings are human beings, no matter what they look like, or where they come from.

Sad to say, the church has often reflected the attitudes and biases of the society around it. History is full of examples of Christians viewing people of races and ethnicities other than their own as inferior beings, and treating them abusively. We live with the legacy of that history today, even here in Canada, including the ongoing tension between white people and black people, and the tension between white people and Indigenous people. There are hopeful signs in today's society that those tensions may at last be easing. May the church — and Christian individuals — be at the forefront in the easing of those tensions, then, for the Epiphany story clearly points us in that direction.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Gracious and generous God:

On this first Sunday of the New Year, we give you thanks for your blessings to us throughout the past year, even though it was a particularly stressful year for both ourselves and the world as a whole. We will remember the year 2020 as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic; and we give you thanks for the ways in which people have rallied and worked together to limit the spread of infection, as well as to fight the disease through the development and production of new vaccines. We give you thanks for those who have worked hard — and continue to do so — to care for those who have become sick and the dying. We give thanks for the leadership provided by public health authorities and governments in promoting measures to minimize the spread of the virus, as well as measures to support those whose incomes or businesses have been negatively affected. We give thanks for people who do jobs in which they come into contact with large numbers of people every day, exposing themselves daily to the risk of infection. We give thanks for the efforts of people in the education system to adapt to current conditions, in order to continue to provide education while seeking to keep students and themselves safe from infection. We give thanks for those who provide care for frail seniors — a task that has become much more stressful because of the pandemic. And we give special thanks for those who have been working on developing vaccines, for the vaccines that have been developed so far, and for vaccination programs that have gotten underway. We pray for your continued blessing on everyone affected by the pandemic, and on everyone involved in the struggle to bring it under control.

On this Sunday before Epiphany, we give you thanks also for the message of the Epiphany story: that your interest, love, and concern extend to *all* the people of the world, not just to some. Keep reminding us, then, to broaden the scope of *our* interest, love, and concern to in-

clude people of all kinds as well, not just those with whom we have things in common. Indeed, may your church become increasingly a community of people who come from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of the world as a whole — both here in Canada and throughout the world. Enable us to establish within the church the peace and harmony that is so elusive in the rest of the world.

Gracious God: Hear our prayers for members of our congregations and others close to us who are experiencing difficulty or distress; in particular, those whom we now name before you: _____ . We ask your blessing on them, so that they may receive your strength, guidance, encouragement, or healing, according to their needs, so that they may be sustained, and restored to wholeness.

And we pray also for the needs of the world at large. In this year when we have been so pre-occupied with the pandemic, it has been easy to overlook or forget about other things. We pray for our leaders, then, that they may receive the wisdom they need to deal with other matters also, including climate change, the rights of Indigenous people, the issue of medical assistance in dying, and the well-being of those who agitate for human rights in countries where those rights are not respected.

We pray as well for people who have suffered losses in the many natural disasters that have taken place around the world in the past year, including the landslide in Norway and the earthquake in Croatia just this past week. We ask your blessing on those who have lost loved ones, homes, workplaces or businesses, as well as those who have suffered serious injury. May your strength be with each one, and may they receive the support and assistance they need to sustain them.

Hear these our prayers, gracious God, for we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead —

and into the year ahead —

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue striving to live in God's ways

day by day.

And may God bless you:

May he continue to give you his guidance

and his strength;

in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.