

RUNNYMEDE United Church
The Sunday of Epiphany, January 3, 2010
Matthew 2:1-12
'There with the Magi'

Have you heard the story of kids placing a creche on the altar? One shouts: 'Where do I put the wise guys?'

Today's question: Where do you put the wise guys in your life? Today is the Sunday before Epiphany, always January 6, Christianity's oldest festival, except for Easter. In the early church, January 6 was more significant than Christmas, but today, it's often overlooked, usually a 'work day'. Too bad! Epiphany is a day of splendour, the original time for giving gifts, like those wise 'guys' - perhaps kings, perhaps astrologers, perhaps three, perhaps more - who followed a star to find a child, to whom they presented gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Epiphany means 'manifest, shown forth'. One dictionary defines epiphany as 'sudden manifestation of the essence of something otherwise ordinary.' Wow! Epiphany is that moment, in comic strips, when a light bulb flashes overhead: no longer in the dark, a great 'AHA' echoes through life.

But, it's time to pack up holly and creche, box away Mary and Joseph, sheep, magi, star, baby. (My mom always said that's what Epiphany means: all decorations put away by January 6; my inner alarm clock still sounds, today.)

As we 'put Christmas away', and Epiphany arrives, life may begin to feel 'normal' again, whatever that means. School, exams, cold days, longer work hours... even new security measures - all seem routine, for many. Isn't that the human story? But is that all there is? Where does Epiphany's light shine now?

This year, moving into an unknown, sometimes scary, new decade, we grasp, there, with the Magi, that death and terror are real and painful. And, there, with the magi, perhaps, in Epiphany's light, we understand that in the midst of suffering, fear, climate change, human beings can learn to live, even to die, with courage, with a dream, with a loving heart. Life has meaning. The magi knew that. There, with the magi, death is real, but so is God's presence.

'As with gladness ones of old did the guiding star behold....' Yes. But dread accompanies gladness. The magi knew, their dreams told them, that in the star's radiant light, 'Herod bartered lives - including children's - for power...'

Epiphany's story: foreigners sight a sign in the heavens, decipher meaning from celestial bodies, follow a star, meet a madman and bow to an infant - and their story becomes our story. Something about this infant, cushioned in straw, surrounded by sheep and donkey, draws them to offer gifts. There, with the magi, do you want to begin a journey - one that may take a lifetime - to follow a star and pay him homage? Are you willing to risk that?

For the world of these Magi, beautiful, wondrous, is also fragile.

There, with the magi, find Jesus: and see the world's response: gifts, awe, homage, yes - and fear, hatred, a tyrant's terrible brutality... For the magi dreamed, too, of the terror of the ages: innocents perishing, refugees fleeing.

Herod, like others with the power of life and death, has no pity. He was highly disturbed by the Magi's claim that the King of the Jews had been born. After all, the Roman Senate had conferred on him the title, "King of the Jews." The suggestion, then, that a new king of the Jews had been born challenged him. And Herod did not take lightly any challenge to his throne. In his insecurity he had already killed potential rivals, including family. He would slaughter many more, especially children.

In 1622, the Dean of Westminster, Lancelot Andrewes, imagined the magi's journey: "A cold coming they had of it, at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off... 'the very dead of winter'." 300 years later, T.S.Eliot, transfixed by those words and the magi's story, speculated on their feelings, taking the persona of a wise man recalling his experience years later, in a poem called 'The Journey of the Magi.'

The very coming of the Child is a cause of profound dislocation - like death, as much as joy. In his poem, Eliot has one of the Wise Men looking back and reflecting in old age on the journey he and his companions once made. Were they led all that way for birth or death, for a beginning or an end? Was it gift or threat? The coming of the Child signalled both.

The theme of birth and death inevitably runs through the Christmas season. We know that this child is born to die: something made explicit at Epiphany in the visit of the 'star-led wizards', as Milton called them. The mysterious third gift of the Magi, myrrh, foreshows a future tomb. "In stature grows the heavenly Child/ with death before his eyes."

Like Eliot's Magi, once we've been exposed to the one who came into the world at Christmas, we cannot be at ease in the old dispensations. But remember: Matthew and Luke's nativity stories, different as they are, are confessions, not documentaries. That is, they are statements of faith, answering *why* Jesus lived, rather than *where* or *how*. That does not mean they are less true. They impart the faith of profoundly moved people who saw in Jesus more of God than they ever imagined.

There, with the magi, can we confess our faith: that the God of the manger is the God revealed first to shepherds, humble, poor, ignorant; then to magi, illustrious, wise, powerful? There, with the magi, can we see God entering all the world?

An epiphany is one of those miraculous flashes when a phrase or gesture startles us, and we come away renewed. Magi kneeling at the manger: such a moment. There with the magi, see God breaking into our world to take our hearts by surprise. There with the magi, know you are never again the same; in Eliot's words: *"This Birth was hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death./ We returned to our places, these Kingdoms/ But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation."*

Do you know that feeling? There, with the magi, we are no longer at ease: out of darkness, into the stable, a moment of wonder, then, darkness again. But the wonder goes with us, changes us. That's Epiphany. The magi knew only part of the story when they left the stable, but they would never be the same again, for they had glimpsed the godly 'essence of something otherwise ordinary'. Epiphany.

Never the same again. Still, we know that in the ordinary time that followed, the manger put away, the magi returned home, Jesus grew, strong, filled with wisdom, God's favour upon him. May that happen to us in the 'ordinary times' to come.

"Where do I put the wise guys?"

Take down the tree, fold the manger. But there, with the magi, remember Jesus coming into this world, for all people. Filled with doubts and fears, dream of facing a new year with energy, and through worship, prayer and care, ensuring it is filled with security for all, not only for ourselves, but for our world. With the early church, put those 'wise guys' in the centre of faith and find hope, trusting God is there, to guide and sustain you, to inspire all to reach out, '*God's world to heal*', so that we

may know, bit by bit, that we have followed the star all this way, for birth and for new life.

That's Epiphany – there, with the magi....

Lillian Perigoe

i. Quoted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, p. 2161. See also the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*.