

Saint Thomas of the Air Church
First Sunday after Epiphany
January 10, 2021
rmcneely+

We entered the short Season of Epiphany Tuesday night.

It was the Twelfth Night after Christmas

And as they came to an end

we moved into Epiphany

As we do every year on January 6th.

Before it's commercialization

The Birth of Our Lord was celebrated

from the night before Christmas

Until the night before Epiphany.

By tradition, Christmas trees remained lighted

House decorations remained up

And celebrations continued

Today in San Francisco there were Christmas trees

on the curb on Christmas day before the sun set.

It seemed people could not wait to get rid of them

Once the presents were opened.

Epiphany is a Greek word

That means to reveal, to appear or to make manifest.

And the Church uses it to direct us to the historical

Occasions when Jesus showed Himself to the World

First to the shepherds on the night of His birth.

Then in the Temple at His Presentation

The day that Simeon recognized the Messiah

in the baby he held in his arms.

And gave us his immortal Nunc Dimittis which graces our

Evening Prayer Service.

Then the day that Wise Men fell down before Him

And the day that Mary and Joseph found Him in the Temple

Speaking with the astonished doctors of the faith.

I want to take us back to Wednesday, the day of Epiphany
And speak this morning about the Wise Men.

Like the first shepherds
And like Simeon
The Wise Men sought Him.
 for centuries people had been looking to see the Messiah
 The fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy
Even Mary and Joseph sought Him.

Like all of them,
 We seek Him too. Still.

We begin the Epiphany Season with Matthew's account of the
Wise Men.

 The others did not write of it.
 Leading many to conclude that Matthew's
 source for his book was Mary.

It was an event that meant much to the Mother of God.
These mysterious men arrived in Bethlehem
We know very little about them.
Who they were?
How many they were?
Where they came from?
How did they know that the Star they followed
 would lead them to Jesus?
But they embody the mystery of the Season.

What we think we know is most likely from a song
 Written in 1857
 By an Episcopal priest
 The son of the local Bishop
 His name was the Rev John Henry Hopkins, Jr.

His song captured the legends that swirled around these enigmatic figures

The song was instantly a hit

And is beloved by many still today some 164 year later.

“We Three Kings”

Legend has thought there were three of them

The Eastern Church has as many as 12

Early artists depicted only 2.

But Matthew does not give us a number.

Matthew mentions three gifts

And many have reasoned that there must have been

Three of them: one man to give each gift.

The Song even has names for each of them:

Gaspar

Melchior, and

Balthasar.

Legend and the song has named them Kings

But Matthew used a different term for them

A vague Greek term: MAH-goi

The King James Bible translators used the English word

Wise men for them.

A close translation for MAH-goi.

Some call them the Magi, an Anglicization of the Greek.

Legend and the song say they came from the Orient

That covered a lot of ground in Biblical times

Somewhere to the East of the Jordan river.

The Caldese, Persia, Kazakhstan or even further to the East.

So the famous lyric “We Three Kings from Orient, are

To be historically correct might be

We, undetermined number of very wise and educated men

From way far, East are”

Not even Paul McCartney could make anything out of that.

A few things we know for sure about them:

They had the ancient Hebrew scriptures

And knew how to read and interpret them.

They knew something BIG was coming.

We know that they were astronomers

Advanced in the science and

mathematics of the solar system.

And they knew about that Star.

It is conjecture but,

Did they know that two planets, say Jupiter and Saturn

Would conjoin on a certain date.

Could they track and follow the orbits

And know when they would optically come together

And appear to be one bright star?

Could they even approximate the date it would happen?

We saw it a few weeks ago.

A bright “star” unlike any other

within sight in the evening sky.

One day it was not there and then it appeared.

Soon it was gone.

It was magical, mystical.

It had not been so clear in 800 years.

Was it even more profound in the clear skies of Judea

2000 years ago?

Skies like we can only see now from the Sierra

No air pollution, no light from cities to obscure the night sky.

They studied the phenomenon and the scriptures

Put them together and drew the conclusion that the Star

Would lead them to the new King.

Can it be any wonder that Matthew
called them Mah-goi: wise men.

History records that the Persians were well ahead of the rest of the
world in astronomy.

Could that be why many believe they came from Persia
Were they perhaps Zoroastrian priests.

An obscure religion from the 6th Century
with reference to the Stars in their theology.

And then the mystery surrounding them grows.

They came.

They made the long and treacherous journey

To Jerusalem.

All the while tracking the Star as their guide.

What motivated them to do it?

They came perhaps hundreds even a thousand miles

On foot

Through burning sun and sand, waste land and desert.

Risking thieves and robbers or worse.

What was it that urged them onward?

I am amazed today when a church neighbor walks across the street
to visit St Thomas.

How could these men have come so far and braved such risk?

What faith they must have had.

What courage and determination.

And then there was another amazing thing.

When they got to Jerusalem

They may have been the first men of the plant

Known to stop and ask for directions.

Most likely the last too.

Their gifts:

Gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Could they have prophetic meaning?

Some think so.

Gold was even then a gift for a King.

Value commensurate with the position.

Did Gold prophecy the Kingship of the baby?

That He would be King?

Frankincense was a rare resin based ground to powder

That emitted a pleasant aroma

That was burned in religious ceremonies by priests.

Christians would later use it as a symbol of our prayers

Ascending to God.

Was the resin, Frankincense a symbol that the baby would one day

Be the High Priest at the altar of God?

Offering sacrifice for the sins of the whole world?

Myrrh was an ointment of rare spices and odors used to prepare the dead for burial.

It was spread upon the skin of the deceased

To prepare and preserve the body.

Was myrrh a gift to the baby Jesus to prophesy His death and sacrifice?

Did the Gifts tell the story of Jesus

The Son of God

And His mission here on Earth?

Was that what drew the wise men, the MAH-goii to Bethlehem?

Was that the purpose of the Star?

Is the point of the story not

The number of men

Not their office, King, Magi or pauper

Not their country of origin;

But the essential truth of what it meant for the Son of God
 To be born in Bethlehem
 A Man Child.
 With a Mission to save mankind from itself.

Were these mysterious men
 The mysterious star
 Their arduous, dangerous journey
 Their faith, courage and determination
 To tell us something?

These men who were not Jews,
 Not Christians
 Perhaps not even men who believed in One God
 Yet men who at the end of their long journey
 These men of wisdom and knowledge
 Knelt down before the Baby
 As faithful and worshipful believers.

What do they tell us about ourselves?
 Our culture,
 Our Society?

The Gospels of these last days since the Nativity
 Have told of
 Shepherds at His birth
 who were the first to search for Him
 Simeon, at His Presentation
 who spent a lifetime searching for Him
 The MAH-goi led by a Star
 Searching for Him
 To honor Him with gifts
 And to worship before Him
 They were all searching for Him
 Came to Him in the first two years of His life.

They were the first to find Him
 Worship Him.
 People who could have no expectation of His words of wisdom
 His healing touch
 His grace bestowed upon them.
 Even as an infant He manifested Himself to them all.
 They knew from His mere presence that He was to be worshiped.
 What magnificent faith they all had.

What of us?
 We must each experience our own Epiphany
 For Archbishop Morse it was a verse of the 24th Psalm,
 A discovery of a young freshman in the University Library:
 “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that therein is.”

The knowledge that God is the source of all is the beginning
 Of faith
 leads to the Wise Men
 To the manger where God became Man
 God incarnate,
 God one of us. Epiphany

We who have the benefit of the entire story of His life
 The next 30 years of His life, and
 The remarkable last three years of His life.
 We who know the rest of the story
 Do we have their faith?
 Their courage?
 Do we worship in the purity of their worship?
 We who live in a fallen world
 Of secularism
 Of disquieting derision
 Of hatred
 Do we worship Him still?

Did we see the Star?
Could we see the Star?
Is it within us to rise and follow that Star?
Make the journey?
Take the risks?
Give the gift of ourselves?

Follow it to Jesus, the Christ?

Rise Up
Rise
And follow that Star