

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

Pew Bible N.T. pg. 1-2

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go; search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Response to the Word

One: This is the Word of God for the people of God.

All: Thanks be to God!

Matthew 2:1-12

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"A Star At Its Rising"

Rev. Amy Terhune

I'm not sure why, but Epiphany has always made for good comics. My all-time favorite is this first one. It depicts our three Magi. The first two have picked up gold and myrrh, and wonder with alarm "What on earth is THAT?" when the third one shows up with Mary Shelley's monster instead of frankincense. (see back page Cartoon #1)

Another favorite depicts our Magi deep in thought when one of them says to other two, "Hey you guys, I was looking at this star – and I just had a sudden, intuitive realization!" To which the other responds, "Gee, there ought to be a word for that...." In case you're wondering, however, the comic is misleading. The word "epiphany" actually means "revelation", and not sudden, intuitive realization, no matter how it may be used in our common vernacular. In the Bible, Epiphanies come when God steps in to reveal some piece of eternal truth. Which God did for our Magi. Although God is never specifically mentioned in the passage we read today from Matthew, it is clear from the movement of the stars, the cluelessness and apathy of the religious leaders, and the gift of dreams for guidance that God is indeed the author and orchestrator of the scene. More on that in a minute. (see back page Cartoon #2)

The third comic takes us back to our gifts. Again, we have three Magi. By the way, if you go back and read Matthew with an eye for detail, you'll notice that Matthew never tells us how many magi there are, only that they brought three gifts. I'm inclined to suspect there was a caravan of them, which is what Herod found troubling and threatening, but I couldn't prove it by the scriptures, so you can take that or leave it as you so choose. But back to our comic.

The first of our Magi address the Holy Family saying, “We three Magi come bearing gifts. I bring gold, the richest of metals, to symbolize Jesus’ kingship.” The second then pipes up to say, “I bring frankincense, and incense used for worship, to symbolize Jesus’ divinity. Both of these, by the way, are true. The third of our Magi then steps up. “And I bring Myrrh, an embalming oil, to symbolize Jesus’ fate as a sacrifice slaughtered for the sins of humankind.” Also true, but undoubtedly troubling to new parents, so as the very understandable looks of horror manifest on the faces of Mary and Joseph, our third Magi mutters, “Yeah, I drew the short straw...” Which strikes me as a reasonable response, poor guy. (see back page Cartoon #3)

But in all seriousness, these magi fascinate me. I don’t know how many there were. I don’t know for sure where they came from. I can take some educated guesses about their social status and education, given that they have the means to travel and bring such expensive gifts. Most scholars think they come from someplace quite a bit to the east of Israel, perhaps Persia, India, China, or even Russia. You and I likely grew up hearing that they’d seen the star in the East and had come to worship. But more modern scholars interpret the Greek, “we have seen his star at its rising”. This references a technical astronomical phenomenon known as a heliacal rising, which is the first day a star or planet becomes visible on the eastern horizon just before sunrise, after having been hidden behind the sun's glare for a season. The star would appear earlier each morning, eventually rising in the evening, and working its way westward as the season progressed and the earth turns on its axis. In the ancient world, a planet (such as Jupiter) rising in the dawn was interpreted as a significant omen or "regal horoscope," signifying a royal birth. [info here gleaned from <https://www.nelsonanglican.nz/korero/a-star-in-the-east>]

But let me hasten to add that just because I can explain the term and the science behind it doesn’t mean that God wasn’t working in it. Jesus’ birth lined up with some pretty extraordinary events in the heavens. I’m with Leroy Jethro Gibbs on this one: there’s no such thing as coincidence. The reason this fascinates me is because these Magi from a distant land, who weren’t Jewish, who had prestige and comfort and power, who had no reason to look for a savior or a Messiah, left their home, their families, their comforts, their safety, and everything they knew in order to travel for months across deserts and mountains, around waterways and wars, for the chance to bow at the cradle-side of an infant king of another nation and faith.

I sometimes wonder what those Magi thought, when they traveled for months on end, only to find a jealous conniving king, a royal court swamped with political in-fighting, and a star-touched infant in an average community with regular parents and neighbors. Did they question their assumptions? Or did they trust that there was more happening than met the eye? I’m inclined to believe the latter, given that Scripture tells us about them. I remain deeply touched that they foreign magistrates had a faith that believed it worth the trip, and understood within somehow that they would be welcome to worship at the cradle of another faith’s king. Matthew, the most Jewish of all the gospel writers, is the one who most clearly demonstrates with this record of the Magi how Jesus comes to redeem the whole world, and not just his particular corner of it.

The first Christmas that Brad and I were married, Brad’s sister and brother-in-law gave us a crèche scene. We had been wanting one as we set up house, and they knew that, so they gave us one. And it was lovely—the pieces were all ceramic, painted bright colors, with lots of detail work, and there was a little stable-like thing to put a few of them in. We liked it, and every Advent, we’d set it up along with the tree and the lights and all that jazz. And when the kids were little, we’d set it up at their height, so they could see it and interact with it. But alas, in Advent of 2005, a catastrophe, or sorts, befell our crèche scene—the baby Jesus disappeared. We went about and searched diligently for the child, but it was only too late that we finally figured out where he went.

It seems that Isabelle, who was 20 months old at the time, had picked up Baby Jesus when we weren't looking. Being a smart child, she had recently discovered that if she put her foot on the pedal at the base of the garbage can, the lid would open up. This fascinated her to no end, so nearly everything she could get her hands on wound up in the garbage can—silverware, sippy cups, toys, books, and apparently, poor Baby Jesus. We didn't realize the fate of poor baby Jesus until after the garbage trucks had been and gone. After a quick but fruitless search online to try to replace it, we now had a crèche scene without the central focus and main point of the whole thing. I remember thinking at the time that perhaps there's some kind of social commentary in that somewhere. But upon further reflection, another thought occurs to me: Jesus Christ is the Lord of my home; the Lord of my life; the Lord of the church. But he is also the Lord of the discarded, the wasted, the soiled, the ugly, the broken, the rejected, the cast off, and the trashed. Some scholars argue that Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified, was a garbage heap, called the place of the skull because it is where criminals and miscreants were left to rot outside the city gates. I don't know if that's true or not, but I do know that Jesus is God's gift to all of humankind, and especially to those most in need of his healing and transformation.

Jesus, too, is a star at its rising. The world doesn't know yet what he will teach or how he will live and love, or the sacrifice he'll make, or the rising that will mark the culmination of his human journey with eternal significance and lasting life. The Magi don't know any of that either. But they believed that God is real, is working, is out there to be seen, met, known. Their study of the stars was not merely academic. It was the search for a holy encounter. And when their search gave them an opportunity to do that, they acted. That's how we know about them. Isn't it interesting that King Herod, the leader of the Jewish people, who should have welcomed God's Messiah, instead saw him only as a threat? Isn't it interesting that the Magi traveled hundreds of miles to follow a star, but the religious leaders of the day didn't even make the 2-mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to check out the Magi's story? Herod saw only power and threats to it. The religious establishment saw only what it wanted to see, and in arrogance, assumed that if God acted, it would be through them, and them alone. But these Magi believed the divine was speaking, calling to them, acting in the world, drew them out on a journey that took them to Jesus. They were ready to look for God. When they went home, they knew God had a name and a face and a purpose, and that they had a place in that story, as do we all.

In a few minutes, Kathleen Jimenez is going to sing "Bethlehem Morning" which reminds us that Jesus' coming among us is more than a memory – it's a present reality. The star those Magi saw at its rising never sets. Epiphany season begins with Magi following a star and culminates with Jesus transfigured in dazzling brightness on a mountaintop. His light still shines, still guide, still transforms, still rises. Maybe 2026 has not begun the way any of us would have hoped. We're not looking for another war or more enemies among hostile nations. But in those hard times when it feels so lonely; in those broken places where despair seems to have the upper hand; in those dark moments before the light breaks, there is a star rising in the night. In this season of discovery and the pursuit of true wisdom, we remember that rising is what God is about. Hope. Promise. Light. Vision. A new perspective. Revelation. And maybe even a new world. Friends, we haven't drawn the short straw. We've been given the greatest gift. God made flesh. A light in the darkness. A star at its rising. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Cartoon #1



Cartoon #2



Cartoon #3

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TOMICS by Tom Gould

The Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:8-11

