

Epiphany of the Lord, Year A  
Is 60:1-6  
Ps 72, *passim*  
Eph 3:2-3a, 5-6  
Mt 2:1-12

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Here we are in the liturgical season of Christmas, which began on Christmas Eve and ends tomorrow, with the Baptism of the Lord. In the Christmas season we ponder the mystery of how the Second Person of the Holy Trinity truly became one of us. He entered into human history and human culture – specifically in an unimportant little corner of the Roman Empire, as a member of the Jewish people.

Today is the feast of the “Epiphany,” a highfaluting term that means manifestation: something was hidden and obscure and has become visible for all to see. Right in the middle of his infancy narrative, St. Matthew uses the story of the wise men from the East to convey the truth that the Good News Jesus came to announce was intended not just for the Jewish people but for all the nations of the world. I’m going to spend the next few minutes taking a closer look at the story Matthew tells about the Magi and considering what we can learn from them.

Matthew is the only one to tell us about the wise men. We’ve all heard the story so many times we think we know it by heart, but in fact a lot of what we know about the magi is the product of folklore and tradition. Here are some of the commonplace embellishments: the text does NOT tell us that there were three magi. The text says there were three *gifts* but doesn’t specify how many magi there were. The names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar are never mentioned; they are later additions. The text doesn’t call them kings but refers to them throughout as magi. A magus (plural magi, singular magus) was a member of a priestly caste in ancient Persia. The text identifies the magi as astrologers, people who study the positions and movements of the stars and try to anticipate the effect the stars have on the course of human events. The discovery of a new star (especially one that moved!) was a big deal. They figured that the new star was a sign and a portent; they interpreted it as indicating the birth of a new king. And so, they set out from their homes in the east to journey in search of this new king.

In 2005 young people from around the world traveled to Cologne, Germany for a week of festivities called World Youth Day. It was a huge jamboree that culminated in an overnight visit from Pope Benedict. Among the throngs was a sizeable contingent from our own Youth Group. Sometime during that week, they visited the magnificent cathedral of Cologne. At the end of World War II, the city of Cologne was flattened, but the cathedral, although damaged in the bombardments, was still standing. Preserved

unscathed inside the cathedral was the reliquary in which, according to tradition and folklore, the bones of the Three Kings are preserved for veneration, and the kings are honored as Saint Caspar, Saint Melchior, and Saint Balthasar.

Even farther back in the annals of St. Pet's Youth Ministry is the time, during one of the mission trips to Neon, Kentucky, when the adult leaders took the teens to the top of Pine Mountain. It was a moonless night, and the sky was clear, and the stars were on display in a way we just can't see from here because of the big-city lights. There they stood looking up in silent awe, when one of the young men, in utter earnestness, said, "Gee, if you think this is great, you should see the planetarium!" It's taken me a while, but I think I've come to appreciate what the young man was saying. In some ways virtual reality, like the planetarium experience, is more satisfying than real life. In real life, it takes a year to follow the constellations through the entire zodiac. The planetarium can run through the whole pattern in a couple of minutes. Plus, you can even use an electronic arrow to point out particular points of interest. The magi had no need for technological gimmicks. They spent years and years studying the heavens and tracking the entire cycle of the seasons.

In some ways, the magi were the consultants of their day. We hire consultants nowadays because they are supposed to have special expertise and because they are outsiders. As *outsiders* they're not stuck in their ways the way people tend to become *inside* an organization. So, good consultants have expertise and objectivity. Great consultants know the human heart; in addition to expertise and objectivity, they possess a keen grasp of human nature. I'm suggesting that the magi were successful astrologers more for their capacity to read the hearts and minds of men and women than for their insights into whatever effects the stars may have on earthly affairs.

So, we hold up the Three Kings as models and guides; we honor them for their attentiveness, their insight, their perseverance, and their wisdom. Their attentiveness: from years of study they knew the patterns of the heavens intimately and could spot anything new. Their insight: it's one thing to detect something new; it's another to find meaning in it. Their perseverance: once they had decided that the new star was a sign and a portent, they followed it wherever it led – even into a remote and dusty and unimportant corner of the great Roman Empire. And their wisdom: they knew not to trust King Herod; after finding Jesus in Bethlehem, they honored him and glorified him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh – gold representing Jesus's kingship and frankincense his divinity, and myrrh making ready for his eventual burial.

May the Magi inspire us to follow in our own lives their example of attentiveness, insight, perseverance, and wisdom.