

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

In every family and in every celebration of Christmas there are traditions that have been brought forward from one generation to another. In some families it's a handcrafted Advent calendar that the children use to mark their march toward that special day. It wouldn't be Christmas without that calendar. In other families it's lighting the Advent wreath at dinner time during the four Sundays of Advent. For others, it's a trip to the mall with small children to visit Santa. And for still others, it's raising and decorating the Christmas tree, putting the wreath on the front door and hanging the stockings from the mantle. For some people it is special food that's rarely served at any time other than Christmas. For those of us immersed in tradition, it wouldn't feel like Christmas without these things. Traditions are important. They help us remember our history and they help us prepare for the future as we hand them down to the next generation. But sometimes traditions can get in the way. Sometimes we forget the original meaning and purpose of the tradition. And sometimes traditions can distract us from seeing the most important parts of this very special season of Christmas...these twelve days of Christmas.

Take the Magi for example. We assume that because there are three gifts, there are also three magi. If you'll notice, we have three figurines of the three magi and their three camels in the window sills in our sanctuary because they have not yet arrived to see the baby Jesus. But that will happen tomorrow, so I'm going to ask a few of our parishioners to move them now from the window sill to the nativity scene, so they can meet the baby Jesus.

Selected parishioners move the figurines

Tradition has it that there were only three magi...and somewhere along the line we picked up names for them: Balthasar, Melchior and Caspar, but those names are not in scripture. In addition to the traditional three magi, there may have been more...many more. We just don't know. There may have been multiple magi. They travelled a long distance so in addition to the magi, they would have needed an entourage in a caravan to provide safety and comforts for them like food to eat and tents to sleep in. In our tradition we have forgotten many details.

The names of the magi do not show up in scripture, but the gifts they gave are named: gold, frankincense and myrrh. They are a part of our tradition about the Wise Men as well as the all-

famous star that guided the magi on their long journey from somewhere in the East. There has been much speculation about the nature of that star...was it the collision of two smaller planets? Was it Halley's Comet that moved across the sky and guided the magi? Did Jupiter and Saturn align in a zodiacal constellation that provided a brilliant light? We just don't know and we probably never will, but there is no doubt that some unusual configuration was in the sky guiding these magi to Jesus. These are traditional details that we associate with the story of the Wise Men and the Feast of the Epiphany. They knew they were on their way to visit a king. We don't know how they knew, but they knew. And they were sure enough about their quest that they made the long and probably dangerous journey from the comfort of their own homes to the unknown destination that would present them to a king...an infant...an infant who was born to be king of the Jews. We know about the three gifts they brought with them, but tradition seems to overlook the most important gift of all...the fourth gift. It was actually the first gift they gave to Jesus when they found him. They gave him homage and they gave themselves in the long journey.

The first thing we hear from the magi themselves is in their encounter with King Herod. They ask him where they can find the child who has been born king of the Jews. They explain that they have seen his rising star and they have come to pay him homage. That word 'homage' is mentioned three times in this short passage about the wise men: once when they ask Herod where they can find the baby Jesus; again when King Herod says he'd like to pay homage to the baby himself; and a third time when the magi find Jesus and do in fact kneel down and pay him homage. The fact that these magi have travelled a very long distance in order to pay a baby the homage due a king is what alarms King Herod and his court. Paying homage is reserved only for royalty, so King Herod knows that this baby is somehow a threat to King Herod's power and authority.

The Greek word that is translated homage is *proskyneō* and it was commonly used to describe the custom of prostrating one's self at the feet of a king. It is the origin of the word prostrate which is the physical posture that dramatically expresses the idea of giving not just gifts, but our entire selves to Christ. If you have ever been to an ordination, you may have seen an ordinand prostrate...face down and stretched out on the floor...in front of the altar in an act of worship and a symbolic gesture of giving one's entire self to God.

Tradition tends to overlook this part of the story of the Magi and Jesus, but it is the very first thing they do when they find Jesus and his mother, Mary. They pay homage to him in an act of worship. That is their first gift to Jesus. That one fact alone is the essence of the story of the magi. They recognized Jesus as king of the Jews. They identified him as the incarnation of God. The action they took is far more important than whether or not there were three magi bearing three gifts or many more. Paying homage to the infant Jesus gives this story its purpose, its direction and its culmination. It is the fourth gift of the magi and the most important one of all.

It is the reason for the long journey. It is the reason for the other three gifts. It is the announcement of the recognition of who Jesus truly is and what his meaning will be for all humanity. These magi...these kings...did not see themselves on an equal footing with this baby Jesus. They saw themselves as subordinate to him. They knelt before him. They worshiped him. They gave themselves to him. Then...and only then...did they offer the tangible gifts they had brought for him.

They showed us in their reception of Jesus how we are to approach the manger...how we are to approach the baby Jesus, born to be the king of the Jews and the savior of the world. The lowly shepherds announced Jesus's arrival to all and the majestic kings from the East showed us how to respond...with the Fourth Gift...the worship and the surrender...to Jesus. The shepherds and the magi span the entire breadth of human condition...from the lowliest to the highest in stature and position. Most of us fall somewhere in between, but all of us have been given the greatest gift ever presented to humanity...the presence of God among us. And that is God's gift to us.

When you love somebody, you show up. You spend time with them. You are physically present with them. You listen to them. You care about what happens to them. God must love us powerfully. God showed up for us in the infant Jesus and God lived among us. God spent time with us and was physically present with us in the person of Jesus Christ. God listens to us and cares about what happens to us. God gave us himself...God's version of the Fourth Gift of the Magi.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.