

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

It's only every three years or so that the lectionary is configured in such a way that we have an opportunity to pause for a moment in the Christmas celebration and symbolism to focus on the Epiphany and all that we learn from the visit to the Christ child by the Magi. The birth of Jesus that we celebrated a mere week or so ago probably occurred nearly two years prior to the Magi arriving to pay homage to Jesus. In the retelling of Biblical events, time is sometimes distorted and we lose track of how events are related to each other. Having the camels and the wise men as part of the stable scene with Mary and Joseph

and the Baby Jesus is not only liturgically awkward...it's probably Biblically incorrect as well. Sometimes it's hard to get the implications of the story straight when the timeline has been so dramatically compressed. Fortunately, every few years, we have a chance to pause to realign the time sequence of the birth of Jesus and the arrival of the Magi....which is most likely about two years apart. This is one of those years. We can pause and take in the significance of the arrival of the Magi and take a look at the symbolic gifts they presented to the Baby Jesus.

There are two events in the life of Jesus Christ that we celebrate with great enthusiasm. One is his birth that we celebrate at Christmas. The other is his resurrection that

we celebrate at Easter. In order for there to be a resurrection, there has to have been a physical death which there certainly was for Jesus. All of us who are born into this world arrived here by the same process...physical birth from our mothers. And at the end of our lives, we leave this world when our physical bodies are no longer able to function. The result is our physical death. The absolute joy in the life and ministry and the death of Jesus is his resurrection which proved to us that there is life after death in this life. We are born into this world to die. All of us will die. We are on a journey. We are passing through this world having come from another world and on our way to still another world...or so we suppose. What we are experiencing now is probably not the only version of life.

This is simply the only version of life known to our conscious awareness. We don't know where we were before we arrived here and we don't know where we will go when we leave here. The resurrection of Jesus, however, provides us with some clues. It's the foundation of our spiritual belief system...and no matter how strong that might be, we all have doubts about the unknown. We all have questions about phenomena that we cannot explain. That's where our spiritual life comes to life and that's where faith steps in to embrace the aspects of life that we cannot fully understand now. Human beings all over the world and from a variety of different spiritual traditions are amazingly connected by intersecting beliefs

and understandings about spirituality. Different traditions have a lot in common. That should strike us as significant.

The Magi that we celebrate this morning and their place in the life of Jesus Christ is just one glimpse at the overlapping of spiritual beliefs. The magi were in all probability Zoroastrians....the precursor belief system to Islam. Frequently, finding out about other spiritual belief systems gives us some insight and deeper understanding of our own spiritual belief system. And that insight gives us the ability to relate to and to understand belief systems that we may have assumed were completely incompatible with our own.

Zoroastrianism was, in Jesus' day, the predominant spiritual belief system in Persia. The primary prophet for Zoroastrianism is Zoroaster. Zoroastrians believe that he was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at the age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations. He predicts that "other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded."

Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. It was a common idea in antiquity that the birth or death of great men was accompanied by heavenly signs.

Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior. The more we find out about other belief systems, the more likely we are to find concepts that overlap with our own.

The area of Persia swept from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the western border of India in the east. It covered a vast expanse of territory. We don't know exactly where the Magi were located, but by any account, it was not very close to Israel and the location of the Holy Family in Bethlehem. Having seen the star and being convinced in a dream that the star was broadcasting the momentous event of the birth of a king, the magi began making plans to make the journey. In all likelihood, the

entourage was not simply 3 wise men and 3 camels. It was much more likely that there were women in the travelling group and many more animals than just the three camels. It was more like a small village on the move than just three Magi and three camels. This was to be a long, arduous journey with an unknown destination and of unknown time duration. They needed to be prepared for almost any eventuality...which required numerous travellers, beasts of burden and provisions for all. We aren't told anything at all about the distance they travelled; the number of people they had with them; the number of animals they had with them; or the amount of provisions they had taken with them. There's no information at all about how they got from there to here to

visit the baby Jesus. And we never are told exactly where the Holy Family was when the Magi eventually found them. There is reference to a 'house', so apparently they were no longer residing in a stable. But we don't know if they were still in Bethlehem or in a nearby village. The details don't seem to matter. What does have significance are the gifts they chose to bring with them.

They had made this journey because they were convinced that the King of the Jews had been born. And they had made the arduous and expensive and lengthy journey to pay homage to him and to present him with honor and with gifts....gifts that were appropriate for a king. And all the gifts had meaning. The gold they gave the baby Jesus

was certainly appropriate for a king. The frankincense was a kind of perfume used also as incense. It, too, was a fit gift for a king.

But the Myrrh was a bit unusual. Myrrh had long been used for its medicinal qualities as an antiseptic or an analgesic agent. It's not exactly the kind of thing one might present to a king. However, knowing what we know about how Jesus' earthly life unfolded and how it ended, the gift of myrrh was not so inappropriate. According to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh at his crucifixion (Mark 15:23). And in the ancient world, myrrh was also a common agent used for embalming the dead. According to John's Gospel, it was also used at Jesus'

burial (John 19:39). As such, myrrh may seem like a strange gift to bring to an infant since it is more suited for the end of life than its beginning. But the magi had paid close attention to their dreams. In those dreams they had been guided in making their choices for gifts for the Baby Jesus. The gifts...particularly of myrrh...foreshadow what is to come. Myrrh is a bittersweet gift, but it is a fitting gift for King Jesus born into the world of King Herod...for an infant king born into a world where evil tyrants plot the deaths of innocents. It is a fitting gift for this humble king who will be put to death as a threat against the empire. It is a fitting gift for the shepherd-king who comes to lay down his life for the sheep.

The fourth verse of the Christmas carol "We Three Kings" brings out this significance of myrrh very well:

*Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
breathes a life of gathering gloom,
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in a stone cold tomb.*

This is not a very cheery verse for a Christmas or Epiphany carol, but it is deep and profound. Even if we would rather not be reminded, the gift of myrrh does remind us that Jesus' birth, like every birth, begins a journey toward death. This infant king is born to die a physical death just as we are each born to die a physical death. But his death is for our sake so that death itself may be conquered

forever. At the same time, the healing properties of myrrh remind us that in Jesus' death and victory over the grave, there is healing for all our ills.

Both frankincense and myrrh come from the fragrant resins of trees, and both have long been used in perfumes and in the making of incense for worship. Myrrh has some very distinctive properties. The name itself means "bitter" in Arabic. Its yellowish-white resin seeps from the trunk of a small desert tree when wounded and hardens into teardrop shapes, as though the tree itself were weeping. Once exposed to the air, its color deepens into gold, then amber, and then scarlet—like drops of blood against the bark of the tree. The resin is bitter to taste, but when

ground into a powder or burned as incense, it releases an extraordinarily pleasant fragrance.

Unlike Herod who acts out of worry, the magi journey with worship for Jesus on their minds. Herod's anger about Jesus stands in stark contrast to the awe and curiosity of the magi. Matthew starts his gospel by showing a contrast between the Gentiles and Jewish secular and religious leaders. The Magi "knelt down and paid him homage." (verse 11), but King Herod the Great wanted to kill him. Herod is overcome with fear and anger and jealousy. By contrast, upon seeing the child, the magi are overwhelmed with joy. Herod is not. The horror he inflicts later upon innocent children...males under two years

old...reflects his displeasure and his ruthless vengeance and evil personified.

The evangelist Matthew tells us that Zoroastrian priests followed the star of Bethlehem to Jesus' birthplace to assure his audience that Jesus is a fulfillment not only of Old Testament prophecy of the virgin birth, but also Zoroastrian virgin birth prophecies. The Gentile Magi recognize Jesus' divinity and kingship. Matthew presents Jesus as the expected King of the Jews and the Gentiles. It was important for Matthew to show that the Magi went to Bethlehem, not Rome, to look for the King of the Jews, the Messiah. Matthew's audience understood the Persians to be a long-standing religious and political ally against

Rome. Matthew wants to show throughout his gospel that Jewish leaders often rejected Jesus and oppressed him, but the Gentiles accepted him and were anxious to follow him.

We begin Epiphany season learning about the Magis' declaration of Jesus as a divine person and a King. The story teaches us that Jesus is our King and we should put him first in our life. The Magi could collude with King Herod, but for them Jesus Christ is far greater and more powerful than Herod. They endured a long journey from Persia to Bethlehem to meet Jesus, the King. They risked their lives for the sake of Jesus. They rejoiced when they did meet

him. Matthew tells us that they paid homage to Jesus, not to Herod.

The Magi followed God's messages to them. How do we know when God is speaking to us?

What part do spiritual practices and dreams have in the way our community discerns the path ahead? There are plenty of roadblocks out there currently for any given congregation. How is it that we might communally discern if there is a new way forward for us by another road?

With God's help, we will surely find that new way forward.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.