

Matthew 2:1-12 **House of Bread©**
January 1, 2012 **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

It seems so fitting to come to this place of worship and share in the sacrament of Holy Communion on this very first day of the new year, doesn't it? What better place could we be than in the sanctuary together where we worship and praise God for guiding us through the past year with all its joys and difficulties? And what could possibly be a better way to start off but with prayers to God for help and guidance and blessings in the year 2012?

I like to think of this day as us standing at the edge of a new road. We can see behind us and we know the experiences we've had on that road, that journey we've traveled. But today, we take our first step on this new path. It is full of light and promise and we anticipate with great expectation that what is ahead will be good and positive.

Of course, past experience tells us we can expect some bumps in the road and maybe even some real deep holes, but there is such hope for us that God is truly doing new and wonderful things and that we will be blessed because Immanuel, God, is with us!

Today we consider those wise men who saw the star and took that step on a new road, making the journey into new and unfamiliar territory, not knowing what was ahead, and yet, following this light that led them to the Christ-child. This story of the Magi is not just a sweet tale that gets acted out every Christmas in a children's program. It is one of the most powerful stories in the gospel. One writer describes it as "the entire gospel crammed into a few paragraphs."

To be honest, we really don't know as much about them as legend would have us believe. Legend says they were kings from the east – 3 of them with the names of Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar but the truth is, the Bible doesn't tell us their names or even that there were three of them. We assume three because the Scriptures do say they brought three expensive gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

We are also told they were astronomers - people who studied the stars. They were "magi" or "magicians" who, back in those days were people who were astronomers, who read the stars and predicted the future. Sort of like a fortune teller.

The truth is they are the kind of people who were condemned by Jewish religious leaders. In fact, Paul describes Jewish magi in Acts 13, verse 10 in this way: "You are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?"

These magi – these star-gazing horoscope fanatics – were not what you would expect to find in the story of the birth of the Son of God. They were Gentiles; they did not rightly worship the one true God.

Yet, they saw this star and they studied the prophecies and they were compelled to make the journey and see this child who was said to be a king. They were wise men, after all!

The thing is ... Herod, who was the king at the time, was a Jew himself. A very jealous king who would do anything to keep his position. In fact, it is said that he murdered his own family members out of concern that they might advance in power over him.

And so, we find these men from the east – these unlikely visitors who are bearing gifts for the new king – meeting up with the present king and asking a simple question – where is this king of the Jews who has been born?

You can just imagine Herod jerking his head up – “WHAT???” And then, cunningly acting as though he too wants to worship this new king. And he calls in his own wise men who tell him about the prophecy – that the promised Messiah – the king – would be born in the city of Bethlehem.

And so he kindly instructs the visitors to come back and let him know where to find this child so he too, can worship him. (Unfortunately, he is also already plotting to have all the baby boys in the land, two years old and younger, killed.)

The wise men go and do find the baby and they do bow down to worship him. And an angel tells them to go home a different way and not to go back to Herod, which, again, they are wise enough to obey.

But here is the story – unlikely worshippers that they are – they fit in with God’s powerful plan so beautifully. If you think about it, the whole story and all who were the main characters are not what one would expect for the birth of a king and especially for the birth of the Son of God – the Christ child.

Shepherds – the poorest of the poor; nameless, hard workers, who had nothing – were the first to hear the announcement of the good news and to arrive to see him and worship him.

Gentiles – who seemed to have wealth and were bearing gifts – but who were not of the Jewish faith and in fact would be condemned by the Jewish leaders – see the light and follow the star, traveling for two years to see this good news.

Last week, we named the Shepherds with our names – the lowly, the unnamed, the unimportant, the laborer.

This week, we name the wise men with our names – because they too, are really unknown, they too were foreigners, they were not prestigious in the eyes of the religious. They were wise because they took the journey to follow the star – to let the light guide them even though they did not really know where it would lead. They just allowed the promise of the prophecy to fill their hearts and to guide their journey to Bethlehem.

And what about Bethlehem? That too, seems an unlikely place for the Son of God to be born. A stable, among the animals? Born to a young peasant girl who was engaged to a carpenter – another lowly job?

Do you know that the name Bethlehem, in Hebrew, means “House of Bread?” Don’t you think it is rather significant that we come to this table to remember the one who was born in the city of Bethlehem (House of Bread) whose light revealed the love and salvation of God to us? (That is, we’ve had an epiphany! We’ve seen the light!) And he gave us this sacrament – to break bread in remembrance of his body that was broken for us.

The wise men found the baby and presented their best gifts of gold – a gift fit for a king; of frankincense – a gift appropriate for a priest; and of myrrh – a gift that is used as anointing oil for one who would die.

They represent us – those who are gentiles, not of the Jewish faith – the chosen race of God. They represent us – who had an epiphany, who saw the light and took the step of faith and who have been accepted into the family of God just as sure as if we had been born in the Jerusalem temple ourselves.

This is the powerful gospel story – the good news! For unto US a child is born –in the city of Bethlehem – the House of Bread – a Savior, who is Christ, the King!

The devotional These Days has the story from yesterday’s devotion about a family whose house caught on fire. As the family was about to exit the house, a little boy turned and ran up the stairs to get something. Suddenly, he appeared at a window, calling for his daddy.

The child’s father yelled for him to jump and that he would catch him. “But, daddy,” the boy cried, “I can’t see you!”

“I know,” shouted his dad, “but I can see you!”

As we begin this new year, we start fresh. We can't see what is ahead, but we can trust that our heavenly Father can see us and is there ready to catch us at any moment. We put our trust in the Lord and we step into the new year with great faith and joy.

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