

Epiphany Sunday Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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There was a famous Sunday School Presentation of the visit of the Magi one year. Three students had been chosen to offer the three gifts. Their task was simple: come out on stage, place their gift at the foot of the manger, turn to the audience, and tell them the name of their gift. The first child was the veteran, having played a non-speaking part as a sheep in last year's production. He came forward, a little awkward but determined, dropped his gift, turned to the audience and blurted out "Gold". The next child was a little more hesitant. She looked unsure but made it to the manger, placed her jar down and turned and said quietly, "Myrrh", and then stepped aside. There was a pause, as the third child wasn't sure of his cue. He looked terrified, and taking baby steps, made his way on stage. When he saw his parents, he waved slightly and that emboldened him. He placed his jar at the foot of the manger, turned around,

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braced himself, and remembering all the rehearsal instructions about speaking loud and clear, he said, “Frank sent this”.

Our collect for today, the special prayer we use with our readings, would have us think about the journey of the wise men as the journey of our life. They were on the first and classic Christian Pilgrimage, and we recall how Peter and the Epistle to the Hebrews call us to live as pilgrims. In our day and culture, pilgrimage is not primarily a religious thing, but we still make them. It is more likely the family car trip to see the mountains, or Drumheller, or Disney World or Land - that’s our pilgrimage.

But if we are on a spiritual journey, in and through this earthly life, then two travel tips are most important. Pack lightly and get along. We don’t get any details about the wise men’s trip, about what obstacles, dangers and difficulties they met with, or what differences they may have had on the way, but they arrive together at their destination. The wise men would have had to choose what to

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pack, to decide what they really needed, what they had to leave behind, and we need to do the same kind of prioritizing in our own lives and journeys. And the wise men had to get along. We don't know if they were philosophers, astronomers or astrologers or all three, but to arrive together, they had to be committed to discerning the path together, to sticking together, to waiting for each other.

The Journey of these Magi, these Great ones, reminds us of the words of another supposed great one who said, "I came, I saw, I conquered." For what Matthew tells us of these Magi is that they came, they saw and they were conquered, overwhelmed, and overcome, by the grace and dignity of this humble child born of common parents. They found Jesus in the humblest of circumstances, but even in this infant, they recognized something royal, divine and saving. As odd as it may have been for Shepherds to be looking around in barns and mangers for Christ the Lord, it was odder still for these noble wise men to seek for a King in a

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backwater Jewish town, born to humble parents of a conquered and oppressed people.

Matthew gives us three main verbs to describe the activity of the wise men: they **came**, they **saw**, they **worshipped**. And I hope and pray that that is the story of the journey of your life and of this day.

How, then, can we be Magi - wise men and wise women?

1. The first thing we hear about them is their question upon arriving in Jerusalem, “Where is he that is born King of the Jews?” And they say that men never ask for directions! Well wise men do! What keeps many men, and women too, from asking for directions is pride. We don’t want to appear lost or to admit that we need help. The wise men are not deluded by any exaggerated sense of their own intelligence. They know that there is no stupid question. Their journey represents the searching, the longing and desire of all people, looking for something more, longing for a better world,

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seeking to know. Wise men and women ask and seek and knock.

They bring with them, first of all, not gifts, but a question. The questions of our hearts and minds, the quests of our lives, these are the first things we all have and bring, and these find their answer in the Word of God, their end in the Word made flesh.

2. The wise men search the Scriptures. We get confused sometimes, and we think that the wise men came to the Christ child by the light of the star. But the star did not lead them to Bethlehem on its own. The star got them started, but it was only by the light of the Scriptures, by turning to what is written, that they were more precisely directed to Jesus. In that Gospel, the relationship between the star and the Scriptures is beautifully set out. We read, after their consultation in Jerusalem, as they make their way to Bethlehem, that the star now also pointed them specifically in that direction.

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding joy.”

This is something like the joy we feel when we are following

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complicated directions, and we come upon the road sign, or the white house on the corner with the red roof, that confirms we are on the right road. They rejoice, because they see their natural wisdom and the Scriptures coming together and pointing them to Jesus Christ. All truth points to Jesus, and when we see how the light of these natural stars agree with the supernatural light of God's revelation, we rejoice with them. Like the wise men, Christians from every culture, Greeks and Romans, Anglo Saxons and Ukrainians and Cree, have all found in their culture and traditions stars which led them and pointed them to Jesus Christ.

But we all also have stars in our own personal lives - people, experiences, nudges, and wake-up calls, that God has used to lead us on the right path. And when we look on these and recognize in them the providence of God, we, too, will rejoice with exceeding joy.

So the first way in which we can be wise men and women is to ask for directions, to ask and seek and knock, and the second way is

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to search the Scriptures, for in them we find God's answers to our quests and questions.

3. Finally, the wise men worshipped. They found what they had been looking for in Jesus Christ. For all human desire and aspiration has its end in the knowledge and love of God in Jesus Christ, in seeing and worshipping. They don't just know who Jesus is; they acknowledge him in their worship and their gifts. These gifts are, as we sing, sacred gifts of mystic meaning. For by Gold, they acknowledge Jesus as King. By incense they acknowledge him as God. By myrrh they acknowledge him as Saviour. Gold was used in making crowns, incense in the worship of God and myrrh in preparing bodies for burial.

Let's note, first off, that they give Jesus the very best. Too often, what we offer to God is the leftovers, but these wise people give him their very best. And so should we. Now, I'm not sure how many of you brought any gold with you today or happen to have

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some incense and myrrh in your purses or pockets. So how can we worship him?

We offer the gold of our money, the incense of our prayers, and the myrrh of our sins, to our King and God and Saviour. More generally, we may think of the Gold of Obedience, the Incense of Worship, and the Myrrh of Trust, which we all have and can offer to Jesus our King and God and Saviour.

Saint Paul writes about the unsearchable riches of Christ. The wise men brought their expensive gifts, their treasures, but they recognized in Jesus the most valuable thing in the world. They saw and knew and honoured and worshipped in him their King and God and Saviour. In Jesus, they recognized the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace and Justice, the Good God and the Goodness of God, and the Saviour who would die for them and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.

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In the end, it is not so much about what they offered Jesus, but what they knew that Jesus offered to them and to all the world, the Salvation and Kingdom of God.

The first thing wise men and women know, is that they don't know it all, and so they ask and seek and knock. The next thing wise men and women do, is to turn to the Scriptures, to what has been written for our learning, to make us wise unto salvation. And finally, wise women and men fall down and worship him. If we do this with the wise men from our story, then like them we may go back home, but also like them we will be changed, traveling another way, transformed by our encounter with Jesus.

We often call the wise men Kings, though there is no evidence that they were, and yet that hints at what happens when we get close to Jesus. They came looking for a king, but in that king they came to know in themselves a royal dignity. And so it is, for in Jesus we know our King and God and Saviour, but we also come to know

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ourselves in and through Jesus, as the saved and royal children of God.

In the King, we are all kings. In the Son of God, we are all the children of God. In the Saviour, we are all saved.

Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.