

THE LIGHT

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

(prayer)

Today, we are gifted with a year when the second Sunday after Christmas is actually *NOT* a Sunday within the 12 day Season of Christmas. This happens when in years when Christmas falls on a Monday or Tuesday.

I'm sure that most of you have heard of *The Twelve Days of Christmas* - probably from the [song](#) more than by strict religious practice. The "12 Days of Xmas" are December 25th to January 5th. Most years, there are two Sundays within those twelve. But this year, only *Geese-A-Laying Day* was a Sunday.

But today is even more unique. Every five or six or eleven year (14% of the time on average), we have an [occurrence](#) that the second Sunday after Christmas is January 6th.

The day that immediately follows the 12 Days of Xmas is... *The Day of Epiphany*. On the church calendar, Epiphany is the feast day of the magi: the day which (primarily) commemorates the story of the foreign gift bearers visiting Jesus.

Often - in the 86% of the years - when January 6th is *not* a Sunday, Matthew chapter two is read on the Sunday immediately before the sixth.

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The tale of the magi completes the biblical Christmas story for us, which includes:

- The promise and birth of John the Baptist (Luke),
- An angel visiting Mary telling her that she will give birth to the Son of God (Luke),
- Joseph dreaming of an angel who convinces him to marry Mary, even though she is pregnant (Matthew),
- Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem for a census, where she gives birth to Jesus (Luke),
- Shepherds having angels tell them to find the newly born messiah lying in a Bethlehem manger (Luke),
- Jesus being formally named and circumcised on his eighth day (Luke),
- Mary offering two small birds as her purification sacrifice when Jesus was 33 days old (Luke),
- On that 33rd day, elderly Simeon professes that he can die a happy man having lived long enough to see the messiah with his own eyes (Luke),
- And also on that 33rd day, elderly widow Anna begins to preach in the temple that baby Jesus is the messiah (Luke).

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All of that comes to us through Luke's gospel.. except for Joseph's dream, which is in Matthew. Today, on Epiphany, we get focus on the rest of the Matthew Christmas narrative.

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The reason why we hold off this story is because, there is no reason (within the biblical texts themselves) to presume that the magi found Jesus on his *birth* day. I won't try to explain the biblical scholarship during this sermon, but it is fair to read between the lines of Matthew and conclude that Jesus was almost two years old (and living in a house in Bethlehem) when the gold, frankincense,

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and myrrh arrived on his doorstep.

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Aside: as I do most years, I feel obligated to burst a few assumption bubbles concerning the Christmas story, perpetuated by Christmas card art and Sunday School pageants:

- The bible never says that the magi visited Jesus at the manger. Matthew says they came to a house (Mt2:11).
- The bible never mentions that there was a guiding star was over the manger.
- The bible does mention camels (not in this story, at least).
- And... no where in the bible does it say that there were THREE wise men; and it definitely doesn't share their names or what colour their skins were or specifically where they were from. All the bible says is that there was more than one (*magi* is plural; the singular form is *magus*); they were from east of Judea (the greek word *magi* has Persian roots, but that is not proof enough that they were from Persia); three kinds of gifts are named in the text (myrrh, frankincense, and gold).

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Now, feel free to believe that there was one wise man per gift if that works for you; imagine that they rode camels and found Jesus mere hours after his birth because there was an unusual star over the manger.

Combine Luke and Matthew as you like and fill in the blanks within the stories. Just don't pretend that any of that comes directly from the Bible.

It's all good, though.

The story of Jesus comes to us in pieces and sometimes those pieces don't fit neatly together.

Good story telling involves being creative with the transitions between story sections - especially ones that might come at the same topic from different traditions.

As those who took part in that one morning Christmas bible study in mid-December learned: there are a half dozen or so facts that Matthew and Luke agree on, but the bulk of their different birth narratives are unique to each book; and in at least one case, they explicitly disagree - *Did Joseph and Mary get married before Jesus was born?* Matthew says "yes", Luke, "no".

But, so what?

Different corners of early Christianity told the story of Jesus' origins differently. The apostle Paul and the gospel of Mark didn't care about Christmas at all. John skipped over the birth completely and spoke of Jesus metaphorically as the pre-existing Word of God.

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The magi story is a gift shared uniquely with the followers of Jesus (in the early 70s of the first century) by the author of Matthew.

Regardless of its strict historicity and how it fits in with what Luke independently shared, the story of the magi presents some wonderful insights for us, even today.

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Matthew chapter two offers us two separate narratives:

1. The Magi's visit, (vv1-12) and
2. King Herod's reaction (13-23).

Our reading today only focused on the first part, but I want to touch on all of it over the next few minutes.

For Matthew, the story revolves around these magi - the foreign gift-bearers who traveled to

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express respect for a new king of Judea.

Here is the story in Matthew Two:

- It starts with the magi speaking with [Herod the Great](#), the Roman-installed *client king* of Judea about wanting to pay homage to who they referred to as “the child born King of the Jews”. The magi told Herod that they deduced that a new king was born because a specific star they had seen rise above the horizon from their own country. Matthew doesn't try to explain the Magi's astrological logic, but the visitors were so sure what the star signified that they emmassed gifts and travelled all the way to Jerusalem to honour a new Judean king.
- “King” was not the usual title given to the complicit local provincial rulers within the Roman Empire. In the early 40s BCE, Mark Antony appointed Herod to be the Tetrach of Galilee. At the same time Herod's brother, Phasael, was made Tetrach of Jerusalem. After a politically motivated marriage and a series of military campaigns against the traditional Jewish ruling dynasty in Judea, Herod added the kingdom of Judea to his resumé. At that point, the title “King of the Jews” was formally conferred on Herod by the Roman Senate. It was unique to Herod and his relationship to the Empire. So... imagine how the Magi's words sounded to Herod's ears. Herod had made no succession plans - as far as he was concerned. News of a new king was news to the king.
- Matthew implies that Herod worried that someone was going to make a claim to *his* throne under the religious hope that God would anoint a king to reclaim the throne of David. So, Herod gathers his scribes and scholars together to learn more enough the messianic promises: particularly **where** the Messiah was presumed to be born. The found an 800 year old tradition in the book of Micah, where prophet spoke for God saying: “*You, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*” (Micah 5:2)
- Herod kept his worries to himself and sent the magi to Bethlehem with the instruction to come back and tell Herod precisely where the child was so the old king of the jews could also honour the new king of the jews.
- With insights gleaned from more star-gazing, the Magi found the house where Mary and Jesus were (no mention of Joseph being home that day).
- The magi offered their gifts: fit for a king.
- As we heard in the last verse read this morning, motivated by a convincing dream, the Magi decided to go back to their country without sharing Jesus' location with Herod. They were careful to avoid going anywhere near Herod's palace - using a completely different route than the way they came.

That is where we stopped reading this morning, but Matthew's narrative has a second half:

- Herod realizes that the Magi weren't coming back. It is at that point in the story that Matthew reveals Herod's true motives. The Roman-sanctioned *King of the Jews* had no intention of being sharing power or being replaced by a religiously-sanctioned king of the jews. He unleashed an extreme and cruel plan to ensure this child (born to be king), would never sit on a throne.
- In the first half of Matthew 2, Herod is reported to have asked the magi when the star first appeared. Although it is never explained precisely *why* that fact is important, we can draw a reasonable conclusion (As I said before, we can fill in the story gaps by reading between the lines). Matthew implies that this detail gave a hint as to the age that Jesus might be - Herod seems to be assuming that the first appearance of the star may have coincided with the time of Jesus' birth.

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- Herod ordered the systematic killing of all of the boys (in and around Bethlehem) who were two years old or under. So... it is a reasonable to read into Matthew's narrative that the star may have been in the sky for two years or so by the time the Magi met with Herod the Great.
- We have no way of knowing how many innocents were slaughtered, but Jesus escaped the infanticide because Joseph was inspired by a dreamed warning to take Mary and Joseph beyond Herod's territory before the death squads arrived. Matthew tells us that Jesus and his parents lived in Egypt until after the death of Herod.
- Thanks to wikipedia, I know that when Herod the Great died, the Empire split up his territory among three of his sons and his sister — Archelaus became ethnarch of the tetrarchy of Judea, Herod Antipas became tetrarch of Galilee and Peraea, Philip became tetrarch of territories north and east of the Jordan, and Salome was given a toparchy including the cities of Jabneh, Ashdod, and Phasaelis.
- Matthew tells us that Joseph was concerned that [Archelaus] would be an ongoing threat, so he relocated the family to Nazareth rather than returning to Bethelhem.

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That's the end of Chapter Two and the end of the Christmas story in the gospel of Matthew. Chapter Three jumps the story ahead three decades and talks about the preaching of John the Baptist.

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Before moving on, let me state an obvious point. The way that the author of Matthew tells this story, they want their readers to be seeing a parallel between Jesus and Moses: the mentions of Egypt and a slaughter of baby boys and of regal defiance connect the stories.

For Matthew's early church, Jesus was the new Moses ... bringer of liberation.

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The Season Of Christmas culminates with Epiphany.

The birth of Jesus is the spark of something new.

The first ones to learn of this new spark shared what they saw and believed and that spark began to glow.

And then when the presence of Jesus (even two year old Jesus) changes the directions of people's lives, a new light (sparked in a Bethlehem manger and glowing on shepherds' hillsides) begins to truly shine.

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The word "epiphany" means *reveal*.

An epiphany is the recognition of something new. To use another common phrase: an epiphany is shinging a light on something.

Light is a powerful symbol within the story of the magi. They are literally guided by a new light. Figuratively, their presumptions about leadership are changed by the lamp light of a peasant carpenter's home as they see authority in a new light.

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The magi arrive in Judea with the common worldview about what a king should be like.

They leave Judea appreciating that a "little child can lead them".

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The magi let this epiphany change their plans. They would not help Herod.

And the life of the young one (who would later be called the *Light of the World*) continued to shine.

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We allow the essence of the magi's story to continue to shine, when we (too) let the Light of Jesus change the direction of our lives.

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Jesus once said that all of faith's expectations could be met through deeply felt and lived out *compassion*.

What are the greatest commandments?
Love God with all your heart, soul and strength.
And love your neighbour as yourself.

Do this and all of the other commandments are taken care of!

Let God's compassion shine into us, so that *that* compassion will shine through us and illuminate others.

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Jesus believed that compassion was more powerful than violence and hatred.

Jesus' ministry invites us to see the god-given holiness that is alight within each person.

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On this epiphany Sunday, I am reminded that how I treat others is how I treat God because love of neighbour can not be separated from love of God.

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This past week, one of our neighbours received a vile, hate-filled, racist letter professing that *We do not like your kind around here*.

What we think about the fact that anti-indigenous racism was so overtly expressed will tell us a bit about ourselves and our own connection to the height and breadth of Jesus' gospel.

What we DO in the Light of these events will tell us how seriously we want to take that gospel.

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It is tempting to write the sentiments in the letter as an isolated incident and to simply profess that *this is not who we are*.

But a light has been shown on our community (as it was on St. Albert and the countless other places where hate lives)... *this IS who we are*.

The question is: are we content with this identity? Or are we will willing to be the agents of deep change by shining a different light?

This includes not only living out compassion towards those who are victims of hate, but also to have a compassion strong enough to soften the hearts of the purveyors of hate. The inspiring light of Jesus' compassion is for all.

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The followers of Jesus are the ones striving to live within the Light of holy compassion.

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*When the song of the angels is stilled.
When the star in the sky is gone.
When the kings and the shepherds
have found their way home.
The work of Christmas is begun!*

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Let your light shine!

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Let us pray:

God of promise, we believe that along the ways of this life, we will encounter you again and again.
Amen.

****offering****

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