

Follow That Star
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Growing up, my family had a tradition that I loved. When we were out at night, if we saw bright lights—the kind that swivel around and point into the sky, trying to draw in your attention—if we saw these spotlights, we would try and find them. This was pre social media, so often times they were used to get people’s attention and announce a new business. When the lights were sighted, my dad would ask us kids which way we thought he should turn. Left, right, right, left. We would go until we found the source. Often time we would stumble on the grand opening of a new restaurant or a Blockbuster movie rental store. What we found wasn’t really the point, it was more of a game to see if we could find the lights. A spontaneous adventure in the midst of everyday life.

In our scripture today we hear the story of the magi or three kings or wisemen who are surprised by a new bright light in the sky, and they set off on an adventure to find out what this bright star was announcing.

Each year on January 6th we celebrate Epiphany, when the wisemen finally arrive, finding Jesus and presenting him with gifts. This is where we get the idea of the 12 days of Christmas. Culturally, we think of the 12 days of Christmas as leading up to Christmas, culminating in Christmas Day. But really the 12 days of Christmas *starts* on Christmas Day and counts the 12 days leading up to Epiphany. In the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah, they celebrate for 8 nights; lighting candles each night, marking each day in a special way. So too do many approach the 12 days of Christmas with a similar style of sharing gifts throughout the 12 days and marking each day in a special way. In many cultures the last gift of Christmas is given on January 6th, Epiphany.

The story that we know of Epiphany is as much pop culture imagination as it is Biblical story telling. So today we are going to have an Epiphany pop quiz. This is not a quiz where we need to panic or be anxious. We are all winners because whether you guess right or wrong, we are all going to learn today.

I’m going to start by reading our scripture. And here is a hint, all the answers for our pop quiz are in the scripture I am about to read. Hear these words from **Matthew 2:1-12**:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

*'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people, Israel.'"*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

1. True or False: The magi were kings?

FALSE

The magi originated from Persia and were Zoroastrian priests, a belief system that was a precursor to Islam. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions in the world which is still active in Iran today. The magi were neither kings, nor wise men, though this unofficial title of being wise might have originated from their skills in interpreting dreams and understanding astrology. They were well known for telling fortunes and preparing daily horoscopes. They were the scholars of their day and enjoyed access to the Persian emperor. Like Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior.

Additionally, the word Magi is a Greek word and while it was known to refer to these Zoroastrian priest, its literally means astrologer or sorcerer. It is where we get our modern words magic and magician.

2. True or False: There were three wise men?

FALSE

The Bible doesn't actually say how many people there were. We have come to represent them as three men because of the three gifts they bring. One person presenting each gift.

In reality the traveling magi were most likely a caravan of people, both men and women. But, because the people with the most social agency get to be the tellers of history, it is

the men whose stories we know and who we have come to represent the Persian priests following a star.

Practically it makes sense that there were more than three people. If you were traveling far distances into foreign lands, you'd want to be a larger group that would ward off any nefarious people wishing to take advantage of small groups unfamiliar with their surroundings.

Additionally, these weren't college students backpacking through Europe. These people were part of a priestly group of elites. They were well off and had access to royal courts. Part of their caravan were people who helped take care of their daily needs. So less like backpacking hikers, and more like Aladdin approaching the palace as Prince Ali with a whole entourage. Or maybe imagine what it would be like for you or me to move around from place-to-place verses what it takes for the president to move around.

3. True or False: King Herod was super excited when the magi arrived announcing the birth of the "king of the Jews"?

FALSE

King Herod was not at all thrilled to learn of a new king. He knew from the chief priests and teachers of the laws that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea and would be from the Davidic line. King Herod was Idumean—meaning his ancestors came from Edom which was situated around current Jordan and Israel—his ancestors converted to Judaism. He knew he did not meet the criteria of the promised messiah. He was already paranoid about any potential rivals to his throne when a caravan of people showed up at his door inquiring about the birth of the new "king of the Jews".

Something to note: This term "king of the Jews" shows up at only two places in scripture. The first being here at the start of Jesus' earthly life. And the second being at the crucifixion, the end of his earthly life.

There is a line in our scripture passage that says, "*When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him*" a modern translation of this might be the idiom "if Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy". King Herod was paranoid and convinced that the successor of his throne was waiting in the wings to overthrow him. He made life in Jerusalem miserable for everyone. We know he even went as far as to kill every baby boy in the kingdom. Leaving no chance for the newborn king to live and confront him for the kingship.

4. True or False: Jesus was a brand-new baby—just hours, days, or weeks old—when the wise men came?

FALSE

Travel wasn't what it is today. The magi didn't hop on the speedway that took them directly to Jerusalem and then straight on to Bethlehem. We assume that the star appeared when Jesus was born. They then began studying, wandering, discussing, wondering, questing, and slowly making their way. They didn't know where they were headed. They trusted and followed their intuition along with a wild star.

In our modern church calendar, each year we celebrate all the church holidays, which often time convolutes our sense of Biblical timing. Additionally, the gospel of Matthew makes it seem as if all the events in chapter 2 happened day after day. However, there were actually weeks and years between the narratives. Jesus must have been at least two years old during the end of Herod's reign for we are told that King Herod orders the death of children age two and under.

5. True or False: The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh were the typical baby gifts of the time.

FALSE

These gifts were usually given to a king or person of high status. We already know that the magi were Persian priests who had access to kings and courts. So, it would make sense that they carried gifts for royalty with them. Additionally, we know they were on the lookout for the "king of the Jews".

But also, these gifts hold significant meaning. Through these gifts the magi—and the writer of the gospel of Matthew—are telling a story; they are signaling the significance of Jesus. Gold is a sign of kingship, long associated with gods. Frankincense represents wisdom and worship. It was, and still is, costly incense. And myrrh, a prized perfume, was used in anointings and consecrating kings. It was also used in the process of preparing a body after death. These gifts represent Jesus' kingship, his right to be worshiped, and the foreshadowing of his death. While diapers and formula might have been more practical, these gifts have their places as well.

Throughout the Biblical narrative, the stories I am most drawn to are the ones where God uses ordinary people, going through their ordinary days, in their ordinary messiness, to make an extraordinary impact. The story of Epiphany is just that. These gentiles—they weren't even Jews—trusted their gut instinct that they needed to follow an exceptionally bright star for years, through multiple countries, to see where it led them. And through their faithfulness they serve as witnesses to the coming messiah. They serve as leaders for countless generations of seekers. They serve as a reminder of what it means to trust and follow.

There is a newer tradition that many churches have added to their Epiphany practice the last few years which is picking "star words" or "star gifts". These are words that help to guide us throughout the year. Theologically they represent the star that the magi followed. But they

also represent our trust that God uses multiple ways to guide us and speak to us. God is often easy to miss in our daily hustle and bustle, but star words help to draw our attention to God in our midst, inviting us into a new prayer rhythm of reflection and review that can be a powerful and new way to connect with God.

On the table in the fellowship area are blank stars and a basket of words. You are invited to pick a star word at random—you are encouraged not to hunt and peck for “just the right word”, but trust that the word you pick is the right word for you—so pick a word and write that word down on a star. You can decorate it however you like. Then place your star in a spot where you will be reminded of it throughout the year (maybe a day planner or your bathroom mirror). I’d love to hear how your star words guide you throughout the year.

I want to finish with a poem written by Shelly Barsuhn

The Kingdom

When, secondhand, we heard the shepherds call,
 "The anointed has come!"
we set out,
arriving in this kingdom a moment or a lifetime ago.
We have journeyed from
continents apart,
tundra, tropics, poverty, privilege,
energy, exhaustion, giddiness, grief.
Through some miracle,
the Messiah has brought us together.

We are all refugees
with nothing of worth to bring--
no gold, frankincense, or myrrh.
We have no drum to play.
The gifts we tried to carry,
our best doctrines, rules, and dogmas,
slip like air through our fingers.
We cup our hands, offering nothing.

Come stranger,
we have found our home.
The songs that welcome us here
are not the songs of angels
 (who harmonize in a different realm)
but the hum of God's grace and love
which we intone in messy unison.

In this kingdom,

no one who journeys to the Christ
is unworthy or alien.
In this kingdom,
we are companions
standing close as the wind howls.