

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Yesterday was actually the last day of our celebration of the twelve days of Christmas. And today is the major feast day of the church known as the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word “epiphany” comes from the Greek meaning “manifestation”...and, the most well known part of the greater story of the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ is the one we hear today...the wonderful story of the Magi, or the ones we call “the Wise Men”.

When I say this is the “most well known part”...this story of the Magi...you know, of course, that my reference is generational. In the same way that so much of the so-called “holiday music” we can hear on the radio from November 1st on is completely devoid of any true Christmas carols, you and I know that there are entire legions of younger people who have never heard, and have no clue, of the Nativity story. Those of us who know these stories are now a sub-culture, and a very minority one at that.

However, if you are here today, I can presume that today’s gospel lesson is a story you have heard many times...or, at least, you think you have heard...and that can be a problem. As soon as I, or any other person, start reading this text, folks might tune it out with: "I already know that story." But, this story of the Magi is not just a sweet tale that gets acted out in a Christmas children's program. Instead, it is one of the most powerful stories in the gospel.

How well do we really know this story -- the story Matthew tells -- the biblical story? It is important to consider, when we compare what is written to what we think we know, because it can re-shape our process when we read all scripture. And I mean, really really read it.

For example, how many “wise men” are there? Most people answer, "three", and they might be right, but we do not know as the Bible gives no number. The number three comes from legends and perhaps from the three gifts.

Their names? The Bible gives no names, but one legend lists them as: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar, who was a black man.

We sing, "We three kings of Orient are..." Were they kings? The Bible never says that they are kings, but calls them "magi". Magi were a number of different things, but they were not kings.

So, here I am, blowing up our common understanding of this simple story...and why? Well, you and I are products of a standard 20th and 21st century foundation of rational, analytical thought...and that is why so much of scripture does not make sense in our post-modern world. We get caught up in the literal detail of everything, and have lost the real, true, deeper meaning of the wonder of what we read and hear. Not just in scripture, but in so much of life.

Walk on water? Raised from the dead? Feeding five thousand from a few fish and

loaves of bread? Talk about a tough sell to a 21st century world hardened by an understanding that the deepest yearnings of the human heart are exclusively fed by tweets, texting and social media!!

Tough sell?

Well, I say we, as the greater church in this 21st century, can meet the challenge and extraordinary opportunity through today's and tomorrow's technology...and we can do that by telling the story that DOES feed the human heart...starting with today's Magi story.

To understand the power of this story, we must first come to a new understanding of the Magi. Many English translations render this Greek word, "magi", as "wise men", but that is being misleading about these worshipers in this story. Perhaps, because these visitors from the East are such good models of faith, we have been afraid to really present them for what they were.

Originally, in Persia, the Magi were dream-interpreters. By the time of Jesus, the term referred to astronomers, fortune-tellers, or star-gazers and, in fact, our word "magic" or "magician" comes from this word "magi". They were not so much respectable "wise men" or "kings", but horoscope fanatics...a practice condemned by Jewish standards. We might compare them to people in fortune-teller booths, or people on the "psychic hotline" or other methods that attempt to fore-tell the future by stars, tea leaves, Tarot cards, etc.

One writer describes the Magi this way: The Magi would thus represent, to the early Jewish reader, the epitome of Gentile idolatry and religious hocus-pocus...dabblers in chicken gizzards, forever trotting off here or there in search of some key to the future.

They were not models of religious piety. You and I might think that the Magi should not be there before the baby Jesus at all. They are heretics. Do not worship the right God. They are the wrong race, the wrong denomination, the wrong religion. They do not know how to worship rightly. Certainly they give the child gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh, but those are elements used in their magic. They would have been much better models of unbelief and false trust; than models of faith, trust and worship.

Yet, for all of that, Matthew makes them the heroes in his first story following the Savior's birth. And that is the key to today's gospel reading. That is the real story. Not the detail of how many, were they kings, so on and so forth. Why? Why is that?

What can it mean for us, here today?

First, look at the gospel story again. Notice the Gospel does not call them "Bright Men", or "Smart Men", or even "Educated Men". They are wise men. What is the difference? Education does not grant wisdom. Matthew's story has wise men traveling hundreds of dangerous miles in growing dedication and perseverance....on a journey to seek the truth.

While the more or at least equally-educated chief priests and educators in Jerusalem...only 6 miles away....cannot...or rather will not....even be bothered to leave town after this star.

In other words, it is not one's status....or resume....or bank account....or fancy clothes...or title... None of those things. At the very beginning of his gospel, Matthew says that none of that makes a difference to this story. So, it does not matter if we say the right words, or genuflect at the right time, or do or say whatever we think presents ourselves as righteous and pious believers to the rest of the world.

The key is to be open to the search for truth. To let go, and follow that urging deep within each of us...to allow ourselves to be lovingly nurtured by God.

That's it for the story today. That is true wisdom, according to Matthew. And it applies just as clearly to each of us here today, as well to those passing outside. Those folks on the street who we might call "the unchurched", but are as spiritual as the Wise Men, or you or I...if not even more so.

What signs will speak to them? They work with us during the week. They attend the same schools. Same neighborhood. They are with us at the bowling alleys, in the bars, at community concerts.

If God is to reach them, God has to go to where they are at. As we are the church, it is for us...as the body of Christ...to go and do. Remember, that the star appeared in the East where the Magi were living...not just over the temples in Jerusalem where it was ignored.

The wisdom of the Wise Men was and is simply this: they sought wisdom. They were willing to journey in faith to personally discover what God was doing. They did not hesitate to ask for help along the way, and finally, they accepted what they found....even though "the manifestation", the Epiphany was plainly dressed and had nothing of apparent value. Still, they believed in him. And they did it in the face of a desperate, hard and savage world.

How, and when, and in what ways, do each of us make our similar journey? How willing are each of us to drop what is convenient and safe, and go on some spiritual journey into the relative unknown? And, assuming that we do so, just how precious and sacred are the gifts that we carry, within our hearts, to give to this One who we claim to seek?

May God bless us all with this kind of wisdom....in continuing to seek for the God that is already with us, brought before us in the blessed name of the Father, and of the Son, and of Holy Spirit.

Amen.