

**Christ Episcopal Church**

**2 Emerson Road**

**East Norwalk, Connecticut 06855**

**The Epiphany (C)**

**January 6, 2019**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**“We several wise people”**

**DRAFT**

**The Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its

rising, 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 wise men 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 at its rising, 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.

Lord Jesus Christ, please fill us with your light and enlighten the way for our journey.

Amen.

“According to ancient custom, the priest announced the date of Easter on the feast of Epiphany. This tradition dated from a time when calendars were not readily available, and the church needed to publicize the date of Easter, since many celebrations of the liturgical year depend on it.” So, in case you wondered, the date of Easter this year is

April 21, so we have 15 whole weeks to get out the dyes for Easter eggs, the longest time between Epiphany of any year since the Year 2000! The next time we have this long a span between Epiphany and Easter will be in the Year 2030, eleven years from now.

Today ends the Christmas season since there are twelve days between Epiphany and Christmas, recall the song, “The Twelfth Day of Christmas, my true love said to me, twelve bells a ringing,” which is the 1917 or 1877 version, or maybe “twelve drummers drumming” or possibly “twelve ladies dancing”, depending on whom may have written the version you heard as a young

person. “Twelve Lords a leaping” was in the earliest written version of the song published in 1780 in England, in case you wondered. In France it is “Douze coqs chantants”, ‘twelve singing cockrels’.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Twelve\\_Days\\_of\\_Christmas\\_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twelve_Days_of_Christmas_(song))

“Since 1984, the cumulative costs of the items mentioned in the song have been used as a tongue-in-cheek economic indicator. Assuming the gifts are repeated in full in each round of the song, then a total of 364 items are delivered by the twelfth day. This custom began with and is maintained by PNC Bank. Two pricing charts are created,

referred to as the Christmas Price Index and The True Cost of Christmas. The former is an index of the current costs of one set of each of the gifts given by the True Love to the singer of the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas". The latter is the cumulative cost of all the gifts with the repetitions listed in the song. The people mentioned in the song are hired, not purchased. The total costs of all goods and services for the 2015 Christmas Price Index was US\$34,130.99, or \$155,407.18 for all 364 items. The original 1984 cost was \$12,623.10. [This gives amateur economists like myself a bench mark for inflation which has lowered

the value of a dollar by about two-thirds since 1984, in case you wondered.]

The days have been numbered sometimes to include Christmas and sometimes to begin on the day after Christmas.

But of course, we Christians think of the three gifts brought to the Christ Child by the magi, who later became three in the hymn, “We three kings.” They weren’t kings, but amateur astronomers from the “East” or the ‘orient’, perhaps Persia, that looked to the skies for signs, and found a particularly bright star that seemed to move towards Israel that they interpreted to be a sign of the coming of the Messiah. And they gave the

offerings of “gold, frankincense, and myrrh”. But the number of three magi was a later interpretation. Today we tend to think that more than three magi were there, but at least three. And we have become more practical recently in thinking the Holy Family needed the gold to make their journey to Egypt away from murderous King Herod. The frankincense is perhaps a sign of the Messiah’s holiness and his healing ministry; and myrrh, also considered a healing substance, is possibly associated with the spices the women brought to his tomb which they found to be empty after Christ rose from the grave on the third day.

Jan and I are heading to the Caribbean for several months or perhaps a few years with some breaks here and there as I begin study at the medical school in the Caribbean in Antigua. We certainly need your prayers for us as we begin this journey two weeks from tomorrow. We will be here with you for only two more Sundays. Our time here has been an exceptional one in which we have always felt surrounded by your prayers and good wishes. I had a partial taste of a medical degree experience years ago when I got my PhD degree from Harvard Medical School and briefly led medical students there in some blood research as part of their

required biochemistry laboratory. And I co-wrote a monograph with a famous children's surgeon that became the basis of the bioengineering program between MIT and Harvard Medical School that is still ongoing. I was always intrigued by the practice of medicine, and now I will have the opportunity to do just that, Lord willing. I will be able to combine my interest in basic science and people in a way only God could have prepared for me. It is both an exciting time for us and a challenging time, as I have to memorize 20,000 bones, muscles, tendons, and hormones by June. Wow. But we are greatly looking forward

to this experience. Perhaps we prayed for a warm winter home a little too much!

The surprise we felt at a new opportunity is only a brief touch of what those wise men had when they began their historic journey towards the Star of Bethlehem. Many things could have stopped them, but by the very grace of God they actually found the Christ Child, according the record of Matthew, who possibly represents the accountant of the Twelve disciples; he was originally a tax collector for Rome, a despised person among Jews who was miraculously selected by Jesus as one of his closest followers. God does amazing things with all of us.

So don't be afraid of stepping out for the Way of Christ. The magi didn't; Matthew didn't; all Twelve disciples didn't; they just trusted God and God's ways, and their Master Jesus taught them all how to be fishers of men, evangelists of the world.

God surely has amazing things in store for you. Amen.

## Description:

Epiphany is a sign of God's presence with us today and forever.

## Tags:

Wise, magi, travel, East, Persia, Twelve, disciples, holy, family, Jesus, Christ, master

**DRAFT**

**St. John's Episcopal Church**

**76 Market Street**

**Salem, New Jersey 08079**

**The Solemnity of the Epiphany**

**January 3, 2016**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**DRAFT**

**The Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12**

Dear Lord, may your light shine in our hearts and may we bring our gifts to honor your Son. Amen.

Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost were the great holy days for the early church.

“The earliest reference to Epiphany as a Christian feast was in A.D. 361, by Ammianus Marcellinus. ”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany\\_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))

“According to ancient custom, the priest announced the date of Easter on the feast of Epiphany. This tradition dated from a time when calendars were not readily available,

and the church needed to publicize the date of Easter, since many celebrations of the liturgical year depend on it.”

So, in case you wondered, the date of Easter this year is March 27 so we have only 12 weeks to get out the dyes for Easter eggs!

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany\\_\(holiday\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epiphany_(holiday))

The story of the Epiphany star has even penetrated into the folklore of Muhammadism. But of course the star that moved was to signify the birth of Muhammad.

But back to our own tradition:

[per SermonWriter:]

The Massacre of the Innocents which directly follows in our gospel for today (Matthew 2:16-18), is modeled after Pharaoh's killing of Israelite babies (Exodus 2:1-10), is thus very much in keeping with Herod's character.

The gospel story of Matthew says that "wise men (magoi) from the east came to Jerusalem" (v. 1c). These magoi come to Jerusalem, because the capital city is the

logical place to look for a king. We know little about these magoi from the East:

\*But they were probably members of a priestly caste in ancient Persia, possibly followers of Zoroaster.

\* We call them kings, but Matthew calls them magoi, which we transliterate "Magi." The word "kings" might come from Psalm 72:10, which speaks of the kings of Tarshish rendering tribute and the kings of Sheba and Seba bringing gifts. See also Isaiah 60:6, which tells of the people of Sheba bringing gold and frankincense. That is reminiscent

of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon (who, like Jesus, was a son of David) and her gifts of gold, spices, and precious stones (1 Kings 10:1-10), but the Isaiah verse is future-oriented and points forward to the gifts which these magoi bring to Jesus.

\* We think of these magoi as astrologers because they are observing stars (v. 2), and astrology was considered a learned occupation. However, from the perspective of the Jewish people, magoi look to the stars for answers that legitimately come only from God.

But what about that star that most of us use to decorate our Christmas tree?

<>*[the Greek of our Gospel for today says:*

**"For we [the magoi] observed his star in the east"** (v. 2b). [The star observed by the Magoi could originally have been west of them, but the Magoi themselves were in the east, or it could have moved from the eastern sky to the western sky, but in any instance the star apparently moves in the sky westwardly towards Jerusalem and then it moves to the south from Jerusalem towards Bethlehem where it stops. One comet my wife Jan and I observed ourselves was first

in sky above us in the east and then moved from the east to the westward sky as we watched it. However, due to the counterclockwise rotation of the earth on its axis (as seen from the North Pole), a fixed star or slowly moving comet itself would appear to move from east to west as the earth itself turned on its axis. The **astronomical challenge** would actually be how the star/comet appears to move slightly from north to south, from over Jerusalem to over Bethlehem which is five miles south of Jerusalem. For a fixed star to appear to move south, the earth's axis would have to pitch away from the star axis ever so

slightly, but such movement would have affected the **motion of the moon around the earth** and **also the tides of earth** in some significant even if small way. As far as I know there is no report of a change of tides during the Magoi's journey towards Bethlehem. So a fixed star does not fit the observation of the Magoi, **but a comet might** fit their observation since it could be affected by the gravitational pull of both earth and the sun and a comet's tail could deviate slightly southerly as the Magoi observed. And a comet could seem to appear suddenly from nowhere since comets only become visible when their trailing or

leading gases or water or ice offgassing encounters the sun's gravitational pull and reflect the sun's light, and the result could be a slight movement of the comet's trail southerly without affecting either the moon or earth's tides or even the trajectory of the comet since the gravitational pull of a comet is insignificant relative to that of the moon, earth, and sun. ]

... Scholars have tried to identify the star that led the wise men. Halley's Comet would have been visible in 11 B.C., and Jupiter and Saturn came together brightly in 7 B.C. [But there was a comet other than Haley's that came into earth's trajectory

around 6 to 5 BC, the year when many scholars now place the actual date of Christ's birth.] **“...possibly a comet or nova, was seen by Chinese and Korean stargazers in about 5 BC.[49][56] This object was observed for over seventy days with no movement recorded.[49]”** [And seventy days would be about how long a journey could have taken the magoi to get from Iran or Saudi Arabia or Yemen to Jerusalem.]

(See “Comet” at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star\\_of\\_Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem)

However, there has been no agreement regarding the star [or comet], nor is there likely to be. But this star does not behave as stars do, [which indicates it may be a comet rather than a star] but it appears to stop over the place where the child is (v. 9-10). [On the other hand,] This [could be or] is a supernatural rather than a natural occurrence--a sign from God, who has power even to stop stars in their tracks.” [But in more scientific physical terms, it takes much less force to move a comet’s tail than to move an entire star which may have the size and mass of our sun, which is millions of times larger in mass than a small

comet, and furthermore any star we know of is millions of light years away, and it would take incredible more force to move a star from north to south as opposed to a more natural explanation of the movement of a comet's tail, which is not uncommonly observed.]

So if I put myself in the sandals of a magoi and I am looking up at a comet, I do believe that the motions they report about the “star” are much more consistent with the motion of a new comet that suddenly appears in the night sky over say Iran in the east. The way an astrologer determines the

meaning of a night light in the sky is usually in determining in what constellation the light appears; if a comet appears in the constellation of Leo the lion for example, it would likely indicate the birth of a king, and recall that King David is prominent in Jesus' lineage from the tribe of Judah which is also the tribe of King David. And on the happenstance that the comet appears in the constellation of Leo right when Leo is in front of the constellation Virgo, the Virgin constellation--Virgo does appear behind Leo on occasion—then the comet would likely be interpreted as an indication that a king from the tribe of David was to be born of a

virgin, for example. So such an unusual occurrence of a heavenly star-like body in the Constellation of Leo right when the constellation Virgo was behind it would fit all the observations of the magoi in Matthew, Chapter 2, our gospel lesson for today.

The next verses in the Gospel of Matthew tell how King Herod tried to kill Jesus by killing all the children aged 2 and under in Bethlehem, which indicates Herod was alive when Jesus was born; and since historians are in agreement that Herod died in 4 BC, Herod's death would have been two years after the date of about 6 BC which

as I mentioned when many scholars agree Christ was born, and Herod would have died soon after his failed attempt to kill the Messianic Baby! (According to Josephus, Herod died after a lunar eclipse.[99] This is usually identified as the eclipse of March 13, 4 BC.[100])” <> “Modern scholars date the birth of Jesus as 6–4 BC.[101]”

>See “Determining the year Jesus was born” at

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star\\_of\\_Bethlehem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_of_Bethlehem)

Herod will give orders to kill all the children in Bethlehem two years old and under (v.

16), drawing the lines broadly enough to be sure of removing the baby who threatens his throne (2:16-18). This suggests that Jesus might be as old as two years when the Wise Men appear at his home. Herod's efforts will prove futile, however, because God will warn both the wise men and Joseph, who will flee to Egypt with his little family (2:13-15).”

“But Matthew had a purpose beyond our Christmas entertainment when he told this story about the wise men. Matthew tells us that the wise men came looking for the one who was born King of the Jews (v. 2). Who

would that be? That would be Jesus, of course.

\* The soldiers at the crucifixion of Jesus will hang a sign on the cross that says, "THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS" (27:37). The people who put that sign up did not believe that Jesus was the King of the Jews. They put the sign there as another way of mocking Jesus--but God's hand was directing them. What they had intended as mockery, God intended as a display of the truth. Jesus was indeed King of the Jews. That sign proclaimed the truth

to every bystander--and even to the Roman guards.

“It might seem that we are getting ahead of the story--telling of Jesus' crucifixion to explain a story of Jesus' birth, namely the visitation of the wise men--but the two are connected--Jesus' birth and Jesus' death. Jesus was BORN into the world to save us--and he did that by his DEATH on the cross.

“The story of the wise men hints at the threat of violence that will hang over Jesus throughout his ministry. Matthew tells us that King Herod heard that the wise men

were in town, looking for the one who was born King of the Jews. Matthew says, "When King Herod heard it, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3).

Believe it or not, more people in the world are celebrating Epiphany than on Christmas. For everybody outside of North America and Britain, December 25th is quiet, religious day which is observed with one's family and by going to worship. It's January 6th that is the biggie. Epiphany, we call it, meaning "manifestation" or "revelation." The Eastern Orthodox Christians call today "Theophany,"

meaning, roughly, “vision of God,” and the custom is Russian is to chop holes in the ice, bless the waters, and go swimming in remembrance of Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan river. Perhaps that's where our custom of the New Year’s Polar Bear plunge comes from!

<http://www.predigten.uni-goettingen.de/predigt.php?id=6188&kennung=20160106en>

Prof. Dr. Dr. David Zersen, President  
Emeritus, Austin, Texas

The magoi bring gifts to the Christ Child.

Let's put the same question to ourselves and ask ourselves what are the gifts and resources that God has given us?"

[http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series\\_c\\_discovering.htm](http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com/series_c_discovering.htm)

Pastor Edward F. Markquart, Grace  
Lutheran Church, Seattle, Washington.

And what of our gifts are we offering to  
Our Lord?

Amen.