Matthew 2:1-12

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Christmas was twelve days ago. I suppose we know the story of the “Twelve Days of Christmas” from the song, though we still probably never remember if it’s “eight maids a’milkin” or “eight lords a’leaping”….but we can all chime in on “FIVE GOLD RINGS!” Tonight, January 5th, is Twelfth Night, and tomorrow dawns the Epiphany.

The Day of the Epiphany, a name that means “disclosure,” “manifestation,” “unveiling,” January 6th this year so we observe it on this Sunday, the day on which the divine nature of the newborn Christ is made abundantly evident or manifest to the Three Wise Men and hence, to the whole world. Among Orthodox Christians, the Day of the Epiphany is older even than the commemoration of Christmas, one of the three most important days of the Christian year, along with Easter and Pentecost.

We know the story fairly well, thanks not only to Matthew’s gospel, but to Christmas carols and pageants and Christmas cards and all the countless manger scenes we’ve seen. From a far-off country, Three Kings have come, following a star, bearing gifts to the newborn king. In legend, they’ve been given the names of Melchior, Caspar and Balthazar. They ride camels and they are mysteriously wise and noble. To the babe, they bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And they are craftier than the Roman King Herod, for they refuse to reveal to him the whereabouts of the newborn Savior.

“We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar…” Who were these three we call Kings or Magi? Were they shamans, teachers, healers, from among the ancient Medes? Were they Zoroastrian priests and astronomers from Iran? Were they perhaps Iraqi astrologers clued into the story of Isaiah’s ancient prophesy by Jews living in exile in Babylon? Were they Kurds as some scholars have posited? Or perhaps they were coming from as far as China, following the ancient Spice Route?

Scholars have been debating their identity for centuries, and will long continue to do so, no doubt. Just who they really were remains something of a mystery as does the exact nature of the star they followed, whose light came to rest on that little stable in Bethlehem.

Across the ages, scholars, astrologists, astronomers, scientists and poets have all sought to name its source. Was it the comet of 5BC whose brightness was noted for 70 days? Or perhaps a planetary conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter or Jupiter and Venus in 2BC shining together brighter than any other single star? Or maybe it was the giant star, Betelgeuse, that contemporary astronomers are watching right now to see if it’s about to explode into a supernova. What was the extraordinary light, burning so brightly in the dark desert night, this great source of light, energy and power?

Whatever it was, the Magi must have believed it to be a counterpart or angel, the kind that appeared at every significant, momentous birth. It called to their hearts, their minds, their imaginations, and they journeyed far to pay homage to the newborn Savior.
What does this beautiful, mysterious, compelling story offer us, at Epiphany 2020? Let me lift up two things this morning about these mysterious kings and what their inclusion in the story of Jesus’ birth reveals to us about our Messiah and Sovereign. For as we pack away all the trappings of Christmas for another year, we still have much to ponder, about the meaning of this birth and its meaning for our lives.

First, whatever their specific identity, the Three Wise Men come to this birth as kings in direct challenge to the “real” king of the day, King Herod. Herod had the power, the palace, the army. These kings have the wisdom, the faith and the vision. King Herod ruled by domination and violence. These kings prevail by reverence and respect.

King Herod demanded allegiance and secured it by force, killing all the newborn Hebrew boys, remember, in the vain hope of wiping out this one who clearly posed a threat to his empire. The Magi paid homage to a humble newborn babe, whose reign would make royalty of all people, lifting up those of low degree, and inaugurating a time of peace for all. These kings point us to an allegiance above all earthly powers, beyond all human limitations of domination and greed to a new kingdom of love and righteousness.

These three kings point us to a new king, as we sing in Handel’s “Messiah:” “The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever....King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

Second point about these mysterious and wondrous kings who come from afar. They hail from far beyond the bounds of the Jewish world. Call them Gentiles or pagans, call them Zoroastrians or perhaps Buddhist or Confucian scholars, these kings represent the peoples of the whole wide world, from earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast. It’s as if they come onto the scene from beyond even the pages of Scripture itself, from beyond the worlds the Bible itself can adequately describe. They come from “the East,” is the best Matthew can put it, from so far away that our eyes have not yet seen it and we know not the full measure of its distance and range, just as John Swanson depicts the procession in his “Festival of Lights,” the line of light extending beyond the limits of the painting itself. Similarly, the magi come into the story to represent the whole of God’s world, even unto that which we do not know, speaking a language we do not speak, seeking a wisdom we have yet to grasp.

Matthew brings these Kings into the story of Jesus’ birth to signal that Christ brings the light of God into the world for the sake of the whole world. The wisdom of God is revealed in Christ “in its rich variety” as the Apostle Paul puts it, or, in a more literal translation, “in its multi-colored” expanse. This love, this light, this grace knows no boundaries, excludes none, is boundless in its height and depth and length and width.

The Day of the Epiphany reveals to us the true nature of the Messiah God has sent to born among us, to be born within us. The Three Kings prod us to explore for ourselves the power of this love, the import of this love, the range and depth of this love. We are invited to claim it for ourselves and to let its light illumine our lives with grace and peace. We are emboldened to share it with all who, by God’s grace, cross our path and share our world. We are encouraged to invite in all who come from afar, who embody wisdom in forms that may be new to us. And we are tasked to insure all its benefits for the least and the last, the lonely and the lost, subjects of a new king whose only power is love.

In the story, the kings, for their own safety, journey home by another road

Now as we prepare to come to the Table of Life, in the name of the One who comes to live among us, may we covenant in this New Year of our Lord 2020 to follow the star, to live in the light of God’s love, to live without fear into the glorious future of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, even our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.