

North Main, 1.7.18

LightOfJesusNM1718

Title: *The "Light" Ahead*

Texts: Matthew 2:1-12. Scripture reading: Matthew 2:1-12

*Matthew 2:1-12*

Here are the details from this part of Jesus' birth narrative

\$ he was born in Bethlehem, during Herod's reign

\$ wise men from the east were looking for the one "born king of the Jews," after they saw a unique star

\$ Herod was alarmed and called a committee meeting

\$ the committee confirmed Jesus' birth, as prophesied by Micah, and that it had taken place in Bethlehem

\$ Herod called for the wise men, determined from them when the star had appeared and asked them to look for the baby, and send him the address

\$ they followed the star to Bethlehem, to Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and gave their gifts

\$ a dream warned them not to tell Herod, they took another road home

*Project painting: Adoration of the Magi*

Christian tradition names these "wise men" or astrologers, men skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science:

\$ Gaspar, has brown hair and beard. He wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels in it. He is the King of Sheba. He represents the frankincense brought to Jesus

\$ Melchior, has long white hair and a white beard and wears a gold cloak. He is the King of Arabia. Melchior presented the gold as a gift to Jesus.

\$ Balthazar, has black skin and a black beard (or no beard). He wears a purple cloak. He is the King of Tarse and Egypt. Balthazar gave the gift of Myrrh to Jesus.

These were not gifts bought at Toys R Us. Scripture and tradition indicate that these guys were rich, had status. But Jesus, as an adult: had no place to call home, was a wandering itinerant preacher, teacher and evangelist. When a scribe says he intends to follow Jesus, Jesus responded, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20).

Jesus was a servant. Jesus washed feet. Jesus spent most of his time with those on the hard margins of society. But rich guys with expensive gifts show up for Jesus' baby shower. How does that even make sense?

In many Latin American countries a big fuss is made about the magi. It is the wise men who are

the bearers of gifts, not Santa. They leave presents by the shoes of children. So children leave their shoes inside the front door, easier for the magi to find them.

The holiday is known as Epiphany. A feast is held to honor Jesus and pay homage to the three wise men. A round cake is baked to represent the round crown of Jesus' kingship. A small figurine of infant Jesus is baked into the cake, hidden. Jesus is hidden to symbolize how his birth location needed to remain secret, to spare his life.

Epiphany is sometimes called the Festival of the Magi or the Day of Lights. This season lasts until Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. When I think of epiphany, I think of light. The magi followed a light in the firmament to the one who would be called the "light of the world."

. . . the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned (Matthew 4:16).

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

True enough, Jesus is frequently referred to as "the light of the world. But still, why did wealthy men travel more than 800 miles to celebrate the birth of a child born to an ordinary couple of low means. This baby would grow up to be *Jesus*, spending much of his time with those like his parents. But moneyed and affluent strangers throw Jesus his first baby shower. What's with that?

Maybe it was to cast Jesus' birth midst all levels of society, underscoring his universal significance. Shepherds the bottom rung of the social ladder. Magi were part of an esteemed, rare segment of the population. But both shepherds and magi were excluded groups *included* in the salvation which Jesus brings.

Maybe the magi, as astrologers, read the signs and wonders in the heavens and determined that this birth had historical and religious significance. And they had to confirm their interpretations.

Maybe they needed to confirm the signs they had seen. It was commonly believed that the birth of great people were accompanied by unusual signals in the heavens.

Maybe they needed something to believe in, something to convince them that things would get better. They existed in a difficult and unpredictable time: wars and rumors of wars, political upheaval, advances in science and the arts. Like today, rapid change was the standard.

Maybe like us, they needed something to settle them, something to help them make sense of the cultural fog they lived in, something to ground them when everything seemed to be open to negotiation and compromise.

I couldn't confirm precisely why the Magi traveled to see Jesus. But they made the trip, and it was significant enough to be included in Scripture. They visited Jesus, whom writers named the Light of the World.

“The light of the world.” If we look at 2018 through that lens, how does that impact what we see? Does the future appear malignant, or benign, negative or positive, hostile or pleasant? Depends on what “lights” our way.

In middle school, Frank Cleveland couldn't hit a fat lobbed picnic pitch. So we gave him four strikes and do overs. January, the new year, is a time for do-overs and fourth strikes. We get another run at things. The Japanese say: “Tomorrow there will be another wind blowing.” John Rice said, “No matter what a person's past has been, the future is spotless.”

The Italians have a custom. Midnight, New Year's Eve, the streets clear. No traffic, no pedestrians. Police officers take cover. At the stroke of midnight, windows and doors fly open. To the sound of laughter, music and fireworks, residents pitch out broken furniture, broken crockery, outgrown and worn out personal items—that remind them of something in the past year they are determined to wipe out of their minds and homes. They give themselves a fourth strike, a do over.

On the edge of a new year, the Light of the World, wants to wipe out blemishes, sins, bad habits, hostile thoughts and mistakes from the past year. He wants to give us four strikes and do overs.

John kind of signaled such things when he wrote:

The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light (John12:35-36).

On this first Sunday of 2018, what do you want to release, change, seek forgiveness for? The Light of the World waits for you, wants to give you a do overs and four strikes. If you need that, come forward for anointing as a signal to God that you want to change some things.

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