**Isaiah 60:1-6**

Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
    and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.  
**2**For darkness shall cover the earth  
    and thick darkness the peoples,  
but the Lord will arise upon you,  
    and his glory will appear over you.  
**3**Nations shall come to your light  
    and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

**4**Lift up your eyes and look around;  
    they all gather together; they come to you;  
your sons shall come from far away,  
    and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses’ arms.  
**5**Then you shall see and be radiant;  
    your heart shall thrill and rejoice,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah%2060%3A1-6&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-18827a)]  
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you;  
    the wealth of the nations shall come to you.  
**6**A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
    the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
    all those from Sheba shall come.  
They shall bring gold and frankincense  
    and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**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, **2**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.” **3**When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, **4**and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5**They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

**6**‘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.’”

**7**Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8**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.” **9**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. **10**When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11**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. **12**And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Poor As I Am”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

January 1, 2023

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson from Matthew, telling us the story of the first gifts of Christmas, reminds us of the joy the wise men experienced when their long journey to follow the star led them to the baby Jesus. I am moved by their joy, but I grew distracted in the past couple of weeks as I prepared for this morning. So, alongside of the joy I pray we all may experience this Christmas season, I thought I might begin this morning by naming several of the many aspects of today’s Gospel story that have gotten a lot of “airtime” in conversations and study about the men we have come to call the Three Kings, or the Magi. The following are some of the questions I found others asking, both online and in printed text. Was the star they followed really there? What was it? Was it a super Nova, of unmatched brilliance? Who were these people? Were there three? Were there many more, but the number of named gifts has reduced it in our understanding? Where were they from? They came from the East, but was it Iraq, or Persia, what we know as Iran? Were they Astrologers? Were they, in fact, Kings, or particularly wise? Did they bring gifts other than the ones named in scripture? Do you feel distracted as I did? Please know that I don’t believe we are meant to rest in distraction.

One of the distinctions about these early visitors to the Christ child that I find *most significantly different* occurs in the way the visit has been carried in art. Throughout art history, we hear of “The Adoration of the Magi.” We sing in our Christmas carols in similar fashion: “Oh Come, let us Adore Him . . .”

Let’s not confuse adoration with a casual visit, or a passing fancy. The gifts represented in *adoring veneration* can’t be sent via the US Postal Service or FedEx and mean the same thing as those given in person. Maybe this is why the visit of the Magi becomes for us the Epiphany of our Christ. We get to know just how important this baby is, through the lens of extraordinary visitors from Iran or Iraq *because they made the journey*. They took the time, and the imagined looks on their faces have become the stuff of countless paintings ever since. I wonder, too, if so much energy would be spent on figuring out just who these men were, and to giving them names, if they hadn’t been equally important to pointing out *who Jesus is* as to presenting who *they* were. Likewise, their importance in the continuing stories surrounding Jesus’ early days is more significant than the details of their own trip. We know only that they took a different way home in order to avoid having to meet again with the murderous Herod. In doing so, their gift to Jesus and his parents, far better than gold, frankincense and myrrh, or even a baby rattle or month supply of diapers; their gift was the opportunity for life, and was telling the story of Jesus’ miraculous birth and future mission.

Sometimes lost in our wrangling about whom and what the Magi themselves represent is the profound knowledge that arrives with them. This baby, this peasant child of not quite two years old is the King of the Jews. Jesus of Nazareth, born in a stable in Bethlehem, is a royal infant. We learn this; we have profound, revealing light shined on this information through the visit from the East. Associate Dean of Religious Life at the University of Southern California, Jim Burklo, makes some suggestions around this sense of epiphany. I find myself agreeing with him about the value of epiphanies that have to do with who Jesus was, and who Jesus *can be* in our lives even now, and I think we can begin with the way that Art has treated the subject. The Adoration of the Magi ought to be followed with the adoration of Jesus’ disciples, whenever and wherever they are born. Burlo writes: “The way to have an epiphany starts with being all here, and being awake to your inner and outer worlds.  If you are awake to your feelings, your bodily and mental experiences in the moment – if you are aware of what is going on in your mind and body right now, then you will be awake enough to have a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of things.  What are we really thinking?  What are we really feeling?  To what are we really paying attention right here and now?  Facing the truth about ourselves, reflecting our emotional and physical reality back to ourselves, lovingly, without judgment: that enables us to be present, body and soul, at the manger.”

Because of the Magi’s being entirely present to the signs they read, and because they are entirely present in the moment with Herod, discerning his character enough that they are warned in a dream, they not only travel a great distance to see the newborn King, but also work to protect him from moment one.

What gift will we bring to the Christ child? What gift will be the reflection of our discipleship? If we open ourselves to greater presence in each moment, maybe we will be surprised by some kind of epiphanal understanding. Maybe we will surprise *ourselves* with what we are able to bring to our faithful following of our King. This requires that we actively *present ourselves* in response to God’s first gift to us. We can skate along, trying to find valuable gifts to give when we feel ill-equipped to know with what we can respond. We can imagine that we are too poor to give the somehow monetarily valuable gifts that our Christ requires. Or, we can register very clearly that what we have to give is our whole selves—openly, fully, whole-heartedly in service to those who might escape others’ notice. Like Jesus himself as he was born, without title, without power, and without earthly greatness, the recipients of our gifts may well be the “least of these” whom Jesus himself names later in Matthew. We may echo the words of the beautiful hymn, “In the Bleak Midwinter,” “what gift can we give, poor as we are?” We can give our heart to the one God, who has come to save us, first known to us in the infant whom the Magi adored. I have always loved the cartoon story of the little drummer boy who gets carried along in the journey because he, too, senses something amazing in this star and the child. Not knowing what he possibly could give a king, he “plays his best for him—pa rum pa pum pum.” In knowing the greater promises of Jesus who conquered even death, in what ways do we love God by offering our trust and our obedient worship? How do we offer our best? It needn’t be Christmas gifts in pretty packages, but may well be Easter hope, peace, joy, and love showing forth in our kind words and inviting gestures. When we do so, we also can become just a little bit like the star that guided the Magi, shining Christ’s light, the light of God’s glory. Because of Jesus, we know God’s grace and are emboldened to act—to live for others, and so for Jesus.

For thirty years, I have held in my mind the image of a woman and her baby, outside the front doors of the Vellore Christian Medical College. There with my own mother to tour the hospital that held so many memories of her childhood time in Vellore, we paused to take a picture of the young mother and her infant son, as she gestured that she would like us to do so. When I developed the picture months later, I blew it up for framing, and gave it a title in my mind, at least: Madonna and Child. New art on an old theme . . . In her as she waited by the gate was hope for his healing and her peace. I learned lessons that day that I have carried and that I pray you also may carry: we are grateful for our knowledge and the love we have known, and we share as much as we can of that knowledge and the love we have to give. In this Christmas season of stars and light, of gifts and deep loving, may we come before the Christ child and then go forth with lives reflecting adoration of the one we serve. Amen