

C Epiphany
2013 January 6
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-18
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12
"The King's Treasure"

Anyone who watches the stock market knows that the past few years have been a mess. One investor went to his financial adviser at the bank and asked him if he was worried. The adviser replied that he slept like a baby. The worried investor was amazed and said, "Really? Even with all these horrible fluctuations?" The adviser said, "Absolutely. I sleep for a couple of hours, then wake up and cry for a couple of hours."

The wise men came bringing their treasure. We usually assume that they were wealthy, indeed tradition has it that they were kings. But all we really know is that the term magi or magoi as it is written in the Greek may refer to priests of the Zoroastrian religion of Babylon or perhaps a neighbor of Babylon. To the east, of course. We cannot be sure if they were wealthy or not. They may have had to sell everything they had in order to purchase their gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We have these amazing references to kings in our readings from Isaiah and Psalms. Isaiah refers to the wealth of the nations being brought to Israel. He says a multitude of camels will cover the Israel, coming from rival nations. And ambassadors from Sheba will come bearing gold and frankincense. We are not sure where Sheba was, but there is that story in 1 Kings in which the queen of Sheba comes to call on King Solomon, bearing an enormous fortune in gold, spices, and precious stones. If we were to continue reading in Isaiah chapter 60 there is a reference to nations bringing their wealth and their kings coming in procession, to pay tribute.

By the way, there is no reference to camels in Matthew's account of the magi coming to Bethlehem, but there surely is in this passage from Isaiah. Maybe that's where our tradition of the wise men's camels has its beginning.

What Isaiah is actually doing in chapter 60 is lifting up the spirits of the people of Judah, who have been forced into exile in Babylon. Look! He says. There will come a day when you will return to the land the LORD gave you, and all the nations will come bearing tribute to you. The LORD will do all of this for you. So do not despair and do not be afraid. Now that's a Christmas message if there ever was one. Do not despair and do not be afraid, for the LORD will come to your rescue.

We also have as one of today's readings Psalm 72, one of the so-called Royal Psalms, which pay tribute to the King of Israel.

May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
render him tribute,
may the kings of Sheba and Seba
bring gifts.
May all kings fall down before him,
all nations give him service.

For he delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper.
He has pity on the weak and the needy,

and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
and precious is their blood in his sight.

The psalmist addresses his poem to a king, possibly even King Solomon himself, according to the preamble to the psalm. May the kings of the nations come and bring him tribute, the psalmist writes. Christian tradition has taken the psalm to refer not only to Solomon or some other king of Israel, but to the king whom the magi come to see in Bethlehem as well.

Note that this same king will deliver the needy, poor, and those who have no helper. He will have pity on the weak and needy, and save their lives from oppression and violence. Does that sound like anyone you know?

Then we have the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul writes of a mystery that has been hidden for ages, and has now been made known, "that is, that the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." The Gentiles as well as the Jews have become heirs of the promise of Christ, of his redemption and salvation and hope and joy.

What are the magi, the wise men? They are Gentiles. They have seen a star and have come looking for the one who has been born to be King of the Jews. They have come, they say, to pay him homage. After getting direction from Herod's advisers, they find the baby in Bethlehem. Matthew says they are overwhelmed with joy. They bow down and pay him homage. Then they open their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold, for a king. Frankincense, associated with the temple worship of the Jews. And myrrh, often used to perfume a body before it was buried in the Jewish tradition. A forewarning, perhaps, about what will happen to this child.

The twelfth day after Christmas has long been called the Day of Epiphany in church tradition. Epiphany celebrates the revelation of the Messiah to the whole world, to the Gentiles, which is how the visit of the magi has become so intimately connected with this day.

For the Messiah had come not just for the Jews, contrary to all of their own tradition and understanding. The Messiah had come for all of the world, Jews and Gentiles alike. So it is that these magi, these priests of another religion altogether, perhaps magicians, perhaps sorcerers, probably very able astrologers, come hundreds of miles to find the king whose star they have seen.

Isaiah and a psalmist write of kings coming to bring tribute to the nation of Israel, or to their own king. These magi, astrologers, wise men, priests, come bringing their tribute. And they are overwhelmed with joy at finding the child.

But here's the truly amazing thing. The king's treasure is not what the magi bring to him. It is rather what he brings to the world. Paul speaks of this treasure in today's reading from Ephesians. He writes that God's grace was given to him, that is to Paul, "to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ." Then he adds, "This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him."

You see, the king's treasure is not what the magi brought, nor is it anything we can bring, as if God-With-Us could ever really need anything we can bring. No. the king's treasure is what the king has brought to us. Boundless riches. Access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

These are the real treasures. These are the king's treasures. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are great, but they are simply the response of the magi to what had already been given. A child, who is the King of the Jews. In chapter one of Matthew's gospel, the angel instructs Joseph in a dream to name the child Jesus, Yeshua, which means "the LORD saves," for, says the angel, this child will save his people from their sins. He will save his people from their sins.

That's the king's treasure. Amen.