

Following a star

January 8, 2023: The Feast of the Epiphany

The Rev. Nick Morris-Kliment, Rector

Christ Episcopal Church, Needham, MA



*Oh Lord: May your Word only be spoken; and may your Word only be heard: In the Name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word. Amen.*

One of the things I did in some downtime between Christmas and New Year's was binge-watch early episodes of the Netflix series, "The Crown." Perhaps some of you have seen it. For those who haven't, it is a dramatization of the reign of Queen Elizabeth the 2<sup>nd</sup>, beginning just before the death of her father, King George the 6th in 1952.

In what I found to be a very moving series of scenes, early in her reign, the Queen struggles with a profound sense that her sheltered education by private tutors had poorly prepared her for the rough and tumble world of British politics. I don't know if this was true, but it certainly seems believable that a young woman, despite her noble birth and training, would feel at sea in such a situation. And so, she engages a tutor to bring her up to speed on modern history and politics. I was touched by her vulnerability and humility regarding the task before her, and her willingness to study and ask for help to make the long journey of governing before her.

This scene was on my mind as I engaged the Gospel for today. Surely less rooted in recoverable historical fact than a Netflix series on the royals, nonetheless, the "wise men" men as depicted in the Gospel of Matthew share a similarly thick coat of legend and invention, applied by Christian tradition through the ages.

Who were these characters who have provided deep-seated inspiration for the imagination through the centuries? The first thing to note is that they were Gentiles, not Jewish. And so, our Feast Day today, of Epiphany (which means manifestation) commemorates the first Gentile contact with Jesus, and thus manifestation of the Messiah not just to Israel, but to the whole world.

And, although Christmas pageants everywhere, and our Crèche just below me, and beloved Christmas carols all make mention of "three kings," in fact, nowhere does the Bible mention the number "three" or the word "king." And while the scene below shows the visitors from the east attending to the infant Jesus in a manger perched on a bed of straw, and surrounded by animals, the text says that the visitors entered a house, not a stable.

The two words "wise men" come from a single Greek word *magos*, which has a huge constellation of meanings in Greek, including astrologer, seer, physician, teacher, and even sorcerer, which is how the word is translated in the Book of Acts, when the early Christian movement encounters resistance from pagan traditions.

<https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/magos.html>

It is the root of the English words magic and magician. It may have an even deeper root in Persian, meaning to have power.

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/magic>

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It seems to refer to a priestly, scholarly class.

So, these mystery men are part of a rich, rich passage. There is so much going on here. There is wonder, persistence, fear, humility, deception, curiosity, humor, discernment, and especially, joy, and over it all, the presence of the star, drawing the wise ones in trust to the goal that was worth journeying toward through unknown lands.

I'm especially drawn to their humility. Clearly, they were learned. They must have, for years, prayed to their gods, studied texts, learned legends, conferred with elders, consulted star charts, and practiced their navigational skills. But they weren't afraid to ask for directions. How unlike many of us American men!

I'm drawn to their experience of joy. Imagine coming to the end of an arduous journey, successfully reaching one's destination. A journey that risks life and limb, and journey with no guarantee of success. A journey with wise guides. A journey that makes all the difference, from which we emerge changed, not without scars, but with greater integrity, a clearer sense of purpose, a knowledge of one's worth and value anchored in the love of God. The wise ones have encountered the Christ and they are changed. They changed direction. They leave by a different way. They avoid old ways and byways and well-trodden paths. And they experience joy.

Of course, I'm projecting my own view of a journey towards Christ and with Christ onto the wise ones. An encounter with Christ is an occasion for joy and for change. But if we are to look at ourselves, I wonder if there are areas where we have been changed by an encounter with Christ? In a moment of joy? A moment of consolation? A moment of conflict or challenge? Where are the hidden places that we have found or been found by him?

Or another question, I wonder where are areas that we sense that we need an encounter with Christ? Where we need to be, may be even want, to be, changed? We know it and see it, but can't get there on our own? Where are the places we need to pay more attention?

And what about the star? Did something like that really happen? Was it an alignment of Jupiter/Saturn/Mars? Was it a supernova? Was it a shooting star? Was it a star brought into being by God whose sole purpose was to lead the wise ones to Jesus? Wherever it came from, the purpose of the star was to lead the Wise Ones to Jesus. I wonder, for us, What or who is our star, or stars? What or who do we focus on, set course by, that leads us to Jesus?

One thing is sure. The star points to an experience of Christ. And that Christ is our light, and that light is to be sought and shared with all the world. **Amen.**