

“No More Outsiders”
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Epiphany Sunday: Januar 4, 2026
First Congregational Church Camden, Maine

Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’

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

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.’

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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So, here we are on the 11th Day of Christmas...one more Day of Christmas and then, on January 6th, Epiphany dawns. Most congregations celebrate Epiphany on the Sunday closet to January 6...because its so hard to get folks to come out on a weekday!

Anyway, here we are.

When much of our culture has Christmas well in the rear-view mirror, we still have it well in sight...still singing Christmas carols when the background music has gone back to playing whatever mindless songs they play in stores these days.

Epiphany is when the Magi make their way into the story. I prefer to call them Magi instead of “The Wise Men” because it is closer to the original text than the common translation. (more on that later)

Unlike most of the other central characters in our Christmas Story – Joseph, Mary, the shepherds...they experience no dramatic Angelic visitations or celestial Josephchoirs, no precise directions delivered to them in dreams.

They have observed a Star in the heavens that beckons and they set out on a long journey to discover its earthly significance.

For all our talk of them being WISE...they seem quite clueless most of the time.

They show up in the wrong city, knocking on the wrong door, announcing the right news to the wrong person...they become unwitting informants to King Herod whose search for the newborn baby eventually forces the Holy Family to evacuate as refugees to Egypt.

Speaking of King Herod – he was a major player on the political, cultural landscape of his day. As our reading began, “In the Time of King Herod...” Like saying in the Time of the King Herod Administration...”. He was Jewish, appointed by Roman Emperor to rule over the Jewish population of Judea and Galilee. He levied oppressive taxes, built Temples, and gold gilded palaces and monuments (often to himself). He even had himself proclaimed, KING OF THE JEWS...thereby insinuating himself into the prophetic narratives of the Jewish people.

He seemed to understand that if he had any chance of being recognized as a legitimate King by his people, he needed to prove his piety. “He claimed to be king by the will of God and to have brought the long-awaited peace and prosperity. Indeed, he claimed that his glorious re-building of the Temple was a magnanimous act of piety.”

He did not reject Judaism...he coopted it for his purposes. Instead of shutting the priests and religious scholars out of the halls of power, he invited them in.

His legitimacy along with his ego was fragile and others paid the price for that fragility. It is said that he has his 3 sons killed because he was convinced they were plotting to depose him.

You can understand why, as Matthew tells us, when Herod who receives the word from the inquiring/ searching Magi that a king has been born and they have come to pay him homage he is “frightened and all of Jerusalem with him.” This king cannot have any rivals.

Herod, was a historical figure in a particular time and place, but he is also a stand in for all those earthly rulers who imagine themselves to be the true makers and shapers of history, those countless capricious rulers who would readily sacrifice the lives of others to establish their legitimacy.

All that being said, Matthew does not want his readers to miss how the birth of a baby in a manger in a backwater village could unmask the powerlessness of one such as King Herod. In an ironic twist, Matthew even casts Herod as a herald of the birth of Jesus: it is Herod who, after consulting with the Biblical scholars in his court, points the Magi in direction that will get them to the infant Jesus.

Keep in mind that those who first heard and read this story, lived in a time when the story of King Herod and other capricious rulers loomed large: literally and figuratively ...and the community pledged their allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth, must have seemed so fragile, small and vulnerable.

Who would have thought that a babe born in Bethlehem and the following he would inspire would outlast and outlive so many Herods of history? This is the story we have gathered in this time to remember and to celebrate.

So it was and so it shall be.

But I digress.

Let me get back to our main characters...the Magi.

Scholars have debated and speculated about just who they were. Were they Kings, astrologers, astronomers, fortune tellers of one sort or another. We simply don't know. The word Magi comes from the English word for 'magic' so there is a strong consensus that they were likely mystics of one sort or another who possibly practiced arts that would have been consider out of bounds. They were, no doubt, exotic figures, perhaps with an impressive entourage.

One thing we know for sure is that they were from the East, and, unlike everyone else in this Christmas story, they were certainly not Jewish. Throughout Jewish history, all enemies of the Jewish people has come from the East!

Needless to say, they're entrance into the story is a surprise...and it surely must have been to Joseph and Mary...who perhaps by now had come to expect that anything was possible.

What God was up to in Jesus could not be the exclusive property of any one race, clan, ethnicity, or nation. The light that had dawned in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was a light that overcame not just darkness but distance of every kind.

The Magi stand as the sign against anything resembling Christian Nationalism....the Magi show up as the declaration that love, mercy, and saving grace of Jesus Christ was too big and too monumental to be contained by any one country or people or culture or politics.

You can see that our tradition has lost a lot of its bearings because it has a habit of packing Christmas in before it ever gets to Epiphany!

But let me make it more personal than I have made it sound so far.

For the Magi do not just stand against any exclusive ideology – whether cultural, political, ethnic, racial or otherwise.

The Magi stand in and for any one who feels that they have only observed God from afar...they keep company with any of us who have felt like outsiders...like those who can see others singing and dancing but cannot hear the music.

No shortage of things that can cloud our vision, distract our attention, and drown out the music.

They are stand in an a witness to all who might be reluctant to make the journey to get closer....to come and see...to push through the clutter and the cacophony of our time...to take the risk, to follow the light that beckons them, however faint, however illusive...they are there to remind us that even the shadows are signs that a light is shining...the beckon us not to give up the journey...that it is a journey worthy a lifetime.

Welcome to the season of Epiphany!  
And boy, do we need it.  
Let the journey begin! Amen.