

Home by Another Road – 5 January 2020 – Epiphany

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to come. Amen. PBS

Do you know what today is? What we are celebrating today?

Epiphany.

Twelfth Night.

Twelfth Day of Christmas.

As of today, Christmas is officially over. So make sure you go home and take down all your Christmas decorations. How many of you already have? All of mine are down except the crèche, which will get packed up when the sun sets tomorrow.

Shakespeare's Play of the same name has absolutely nothing to do with Epiphany. It's called The Twelfth Night because that's when it was first performed on stage.

Who can tell me what the "true love" gave on the 12th day of Christmas?
Twelve Drummers Drumming

How many people here have heard of the "chalking of the doors"? At Epiphany?
If you look at the brick above the door you'll see 20 + C + M + B + 20
If you haven't noticed before now, I bet you will on the way out, right? :-)

20 stands for the beginning of the century
C stands for Caspar
M stands for Melchior
B stands for Balthazar
20 stands for the year, thus 2020.

CMB can also stand for Christus Masionem Benedicat which means
"May Christ bless this house".

This tradition has been around for centuries, and I first learned it through a Lutheran friend in Ontario. He chalked above the door at his Churches and at his home.

If this is something you want to do, simply take a piece of chalk, any colour or size will do. It doesn't have to be specially blessed chalk, and print 20 + C + M + B + 20 above the door. Say a prayer for protection or thanksgiving if you wish, then enjoy your freshly blessed space.

How many Wise Men were there?

We assume three because of the number of gifts given. While they are not named in the Bible, legend has told us their names.

But I'm getting a little bit ahead of myself...

In the old testament we hear again from Isaiah who is prophesying:
"They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord".
(Isaiah 60.6, NRSV)

Isaiah is writing about a time when the Messiah will be born. He writes of things that are to come, and as every adherent Jew would know Isaiah, the faithful were delighted to realise the prophesy being fulfilled.

In the Gospel for today there's a lot to unpack in a relatively short passage.

Let's start with Herod. He was the self-proclaimed King of the Jews. He was also ferocious and paranoid. He is referred to historically as Herod the Great and lived 74 BCE to 4 BCE. Herod was a powerful and feared man.

In Matthew's Gospel we hear "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.'" (Matthew 2.1-2, NRSV)

Herod was the self-proclaimed King of the Jews. He's just been approached by some Wise Men. Also known as Magi. Magi are known more commonly as magicians, astrologers, wish-granters. They are mystics and thought to be quite wealthy. Little did they know they had begun a reign of terror unprecedented in that time.

The Magi have seen a star, the same star that the Shepherds followed the night Jesus was born. This star they have been following for awhile. They see it over Herod's kingdom and entering the city, they begin asking around. Has anyone seen this baby?

Herod's reaction is very telling. "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; (Matthew 2.3, NRSV) In other words, there was one who was the ACTUAL King of the Jews. Someone who, when grown, would challenge Herod for the throne; for the respect; for the leadership of the people of Judea. And Herod was not having that.

He asks the Wise Men to come and see him. He asks a few questions, then asks them to go and find this baby that he himself may go and pay homage. In fact, Herod doesn't want to pay homage to the Baby. He plans to kill the baby...more on that in a minute.

The Wise Men leave Jerusalem, heading for Bethlehem. Now is when things get a bit complicated. It is possible the Wise Men saw the star the night Jesus was born. They asked about it and eventually were told about the birth of the Messiah. Walking from their Kingdoms to Jerusalem would have taken months. Then the walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem wouldn't have been more than a couple of days.

Scripture tells us "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." (Matthew 2.10-11, NRSV) In scripture Jesus is referred to as child, or infant. Not as a baby or newborn. It is believed, thus, that the Magi arrived when Jesus was between one and two years of age. With Joseph and Mary, Jesus was living in a house, not in a stable.

The Magi arrive and bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Interesting gifts. Not particularly practical. Let's break this down.

Gold. A universal currency. Would be useful regardless of where Jesus was living.

Frankincense. A hard, gummy substance from the *Boswellia carteri* tree. In Biblical times it was burned as a type of incense used in offerings to God, as well as covering up the smell of decay. Today frankincense is available as an essential oil which is good as an antiseptic and antibiotic.

Myrrh. A natural gum or resin extracted from the *Commiphora* trees or bushes. It was traditionally used as a strongly-scented balm applied to a person following death in order to preserve their skin and mask the odour of decay. Today myrrh is used primarily as a type of natural medicine that contains healing properties.

Okay, Gold. We got that. Universal currency.

Frankincense – used in both worship and in masking the smell of decay.

Myrrh – used to mask the smell of decay.

For a modern-day analogy, bringing frankincense and myrrh would be like bringing a jar of embalming fluid to a baby shower. It would certainly cause discussion. Not necessarily pleasant discussion.

Now, we know that the infant Jesus grows up to become adult Jesus and is baptised in the river Jordan around his 30th birthday. He then goes about his earthly ministry for about 3 years then is crucified and buried. Frankincense and myrrh would have been most helpful in preparing his body for burial.

Could it be the Magi saw something that Jesus' own parents could not? Could it be that they foresaw his death and as such brought things that would be practical for such a time as that?

Continuing in the story of the day "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (Matthew 2.12, NRSV).

If you keep reading in Matthew's gospel you'll read of Joseph being warned in a dream by an angel to take his family and flee to Egypt.

Then you'll read of Herod's realisation that the Wise Men were not returning to him. In a rage he ordered all children who were 2 under to be killed.

Then you'll read of Herod's death, which is believed to have been 4 BCE. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take his family back to Judea because Herod was dead. Joseph returned to Nazareth because he was afraid of Herod's son Archelaus who was ruling over Judea.

Home by another road.

Have any of you ever been faced with a fork in the road of life? Which way do I go?

Have any of you ever had a plan and then due to a dream, a feeling, or some strange reason, decided to go another way?

Can you imagine if the Magi had taken Herod at his word? They'd have come back to Herod, given him the address of the infant Jesus and the story would be very different...

Can you imagine if they had not listened to the angel and returned to Herod instead of going home by another way?

Can you imagine if Joseph had not listened to the angel in his dreams?

Home by another road.

From the age of seven, I wanted to be a teacher. You see, I fell in love with my first grade teacher, Miss Kingsleigh and I wanted to be just like her! I wanted to be a teacher and did not stray from that for many years.

Then when I got to high school I worked hard yet my grades were not good enough to get me into teacher's college. So I graduated with an Honours Bachelor of Arts and began working in the non-profit health industry for about 20 years. Then God tapped me on the shoulder and for a while I ignored it.

Eventually the tapping got more persistent and I decided to test the call for ministry. And three days after my 40th birthday I was ordained to the Diaconate at the same cathedral where I had been baptised in May of 1968 at 6 months old.

A few years later, a friend of my father's told me that my Dad was very proud of me. Which was news to me, as my Dad was not much at flowery superlatives or any displays of affection.

He said my parents were talking, around the time I was to be ordained. My Mam was lamenting that I had always wanted to be a teacher. My Dad said "she is going to be a teacher, but using a different book."

And here I stand today.

A priest/minister who went home by another road.

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Epiphany – 5 January 2020
Isaiah 60.1-6
Psalm 72.1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3.1-12
Matthew 2.1-12