

## Feast of the Epiphany

### Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

### Fearless Following

Dr. Margee Kerr is a sociologist who studies fear. She and other experts who write about how to keep New Year's resolutions say that the secret to keeping resolutions is not to follow most people's usual approach. Most people's usual approach is to think about how we're deficient, inadequate, unsuccessful, and try really, really hard to be different this year.

Instead, Kerr says we need to confront the fears that keep us from achieving our goals—confront them, figure out if the fear is rational, and then take steps to overcome the fear.<sup>i</sup> Overcoming fear gets us on the path to meaningful change.

Whether or not we've made new year's resolutions this year, whether or not confronting our fears can help us keep them, when we hear today's Gospel lesson, we get to see fearlessness in action. We get to see how fearlessness in seeking the holy leads to freedom and joy.

First a little background on these fearless worshippers from afar. Contrary to the familiar hymn,<sup>ii</sup> in Matthew's gospel, they aren't kings, and Matthew doesn't tell us how many there are. The idea that there were three of them probably comes from the three gifts they bring. What we know about magi before the Christian tradition is that as early as about six hundred years before Matthew writes his gospel, magi are known as a group of religious experts in Persia.<sup>iii</sup> Classical sources show them advising kings, performing religious rituals, watching the stars, and interpreting dreams.<sup>iv</sup>

They are called kings starting about four or five hundred years after Matthew's Gospel.<sup>v</sup> This description fit nicely for Christians as a fulfillment to passages in the Old Testament, like in our Psalm for today: "The kings of Arabia and Saba will offer gifts; all kings will bow down before him" (Psalm 72:10-11) and our lesson from Isaiah: "Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (Isaiah 60:3).

By the sixth century, the wise men had been given names and descriptions, often seen in artistic representations. One is named Caspar, meaning "Treasurer," and is imagined as a beardless young man. Melchior means "King of Light," or "King of the City," and is portrayed as a bearded old man. Balthasar means "God protect the king," and is portrayed as a black man.<sup>vi</sup> By the eighth century, the three magi represent three continents—Asia, Africa, and Europe—what was then the whole known world, coming to worship Jesus.<sup>vii</sup> This global depiction fits well with Matthew's story of the first Gentiles, the first non-Jews, coming to worship Jesus, the one in whom all humanity can know the grace, mercy, joy, and perfect love that casts out fear that comes from God.

So, in what ways are the magi fearless?

We just have to start with this one: the wise men are not afraid to stop and ask for directions. If you prefer, they are not afraid to ask for help, get more information. They may have special abilities, like noticing and tracking an unusual star, but they don't neglect the use of basic common sense. Looking for a king? Go to the king's house. Ask for help there. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" they ask when Herod's butler answers the palace door. "We observed his star, and here we are, ready to do him homage."

When Herod hears about this, he is terrified. King of the Jews? I'm the King of the Jews! Herod thinks. The position is filled. There is a young pretender to my throne out there somewhere. Herod is scared, but he knows where to go for more information. He knows scripture will have the details he and the wise men need.

This is important. The wise men know something of God's grace through nature. Through the appearance of the star, they know that the Christ has been born, but their knowledge from nature alone is incomplete. They need scripture to tell them where. By the star's guiding, they've gotten close—they're about nine miles away from Bethlehem—but experiencing God through nature isn't enough. They don't know enough to get to the full manifestation of God. They don't know enough to be able to truly worship.

On the other hand, Herod can get a room full of Bible scholars together and still not truly worship. One can memorize verses from the Bible, but miss the Gospel, the Good news of God's redeeming love for all people in Jesus Christ.

Notice Herod doesn't question the authenticity of the star. He doesn't question the authenticity of the scripture. But he is so certain of his own importance that he won't even go with the magi to see the child for himself. He is so worried about safe-guarding his own power, that he won't even go and see the one who may be the long-awaited Messiah. He would rather stay in Jerusalem, send others to do his bidding, turn his magi guests into servants—go, do this and that, and then come back and tell me. He would rather have second-hand hearsay than risk losing his place, his power, his resting as the still point of his own universe around which everything else must turn. He isn't seeking God's truth, so he spends his time and energy scheming and deceiving.

The wise men, not afraid to ask for help, direction, guidance, and not afraid to trust the witness of scripture, continue on their way, filled with great joy.

They follow the star and the guidance of the scripture to Bethlehem where they find the Christ child. They worship and offer their gifts – gold, for a king; frankincense, to honor his divinity; myrrh, because this divine king will die and myrrh is used to anoint the body of a king. The wise men achieved their goal: worshipping the true king of the Jews.

Then, they show fearlessness in two more ways.

First, during the night, they receive word in a dream not to return to Herod. And they obey. They don't second-guess the divine. The wise men are not intimidated by worldly power, and they're not drawn by it either. They aren't afraid that Herod told them to come back and they're not obeying him. They don't get caught up in Herod's intrigues or see if maybe there could be something in it for them if they go to Herod, or if maybe they can change Herod.

Second, they return home by another way. They are not afraid to incorporate new information when it's given to them, even if it changes their plans.

With their departure by another way, the wise men exit the story.

But they don't have to exit our lives as witnesses and examples. After all, they were the first of all the people, through the generations and throughout the world, who worship Jesus Christ and find that perfect love casts out all fear.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/why-we-scream/201512/forget-new-years-resolutions>. Accessed 11/29/16.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert J. Morgan writes that "We Three Kings" was composed by John Henry Hopkins for a Christmas pageant at the General Theological Seminary in 1857. Morgan, *Come Let Us Adore Him: Stories Behind the Most cherished Christmas Hymns* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 81.

<sup>iii</sup> John Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Gospels* (London, UK: SCM-Canterbury, 1974), 126.

<sup>iv</sup> Amy Richter, *Enoch and the Gospel of Matthew* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 172-9.

<sup>v</sup> Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1-7* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007), 111.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.