

January 1, 2012
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Blessings

Christmastime is over. A new year has begun. The holidays are through. That's what most of the world is saying today. But in the church, Christmas is not over yet. Now, don't panic. There aren't parties or presents to worry about. No, Christmas time in the church is still going on and it's not about that kind of stress. It's about blessings. Today, we celebrate Epiphany. The true heart of Christmas. When unexpected gifts come from unexpected people. At Epiphany, the wisemen visit Jesus and a family is blessed and a nation is blessed and the foreigners are blessed and the nobodies are blessed. People like you and me are blessed. Today is about blessing. It's about God's blessings being turned loose on the world.

Now I know, it seems a little late to be talking about wisemen. Usually they show up earlier in the Christmas season, at the manger. Usually they arrive just a few seconds after the shepherds leave. In order to be efficient, we have mused everything together. Shepherds and angels and wisemen and gold, frankincense and myrrh. All one Christmas story.

But that's not how the Bible tells the story. According to the gospel of Matthew, the wisemen, or magi come to visit Jesus on a separate occasion. They come to Bethlehem with their gifts much later. It's not a stable that they visit, but a house. And Jesus is not described as a baby, but a child. The visit of the magi is a story all its own. It's a revelation all of its own. And that's what we celebrate today. The surprise of God's blessing.

All over the world, Christians will be celebrating Epiphany. King's Day, it is called. Dreikoningen in Dutch. Dia de Reis in Spanish. In Germany and Brazil and New Orleans, people eat will eat King Cake and hope to find the bean or plastic baby hidden inside that will make them king for the day. In England, they will eat fruitcake or spiced cookies in honor of the spices the wisemen carry. In India, Christians will have a parade and eat sweet rice porridge. In Latvia, they will sing songs to the Star of Bethlehem. All over Europe, families will mark their doors with the blessing of the magi in chalk. They will write the year, 2012 and in between the numbers they will write the first letters of the names of each of the wise men, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, C, M, B. Those letters

also stand for *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means "may Christ bless the house".

Around the world, Epiphany is a time of celebration and gift-giving. It is a day for blessing homes and families. It is a time of blessing. Because that's what Christmas is about. It's about the blessings that the wisemen bring. The blessings of the gifts they offer. The blessing of the hospitality of Mary and Joseph. The unexpected and wonderful blessings of God that spill out into the world from this one tiny child. Do you feel that blessing? Do you know that blessing? Because it's for you. It's for all of us. We are the people of blessing.

That's what Epiphany is for: for remembering the unexpected blessings of God. Which is why I suspect that such a rich tradition has developed around Epiphany in so many cultures. The Bible gives us just a few facts about the visit of the magi. That they were from the East. They were following a star. They were looking for a great king. And they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's about all the Bible tells us. But people have wanted to know more about these wisemen. They wanted to know more about who they were and where they were from

and why they brought the gifts they did. People have wanted to know more, so stories grew up around the magi. And they may be just legends, but even so, they help us remember that Jesus comes to bless us.

First, what Epiphany teaches us is that blessings can come from all kinds of people. Traditionally the magi are named as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. There are three of them because they bring three gifts. Kings they are called sometimes. Kings, like the ones Isaiah talks about in today's scripture reading. Many people very early on saw this visit as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It was God's promise come true.

“Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” Kings and nations like no one had ever seen, coming to worship the God of Israel. The nations blessing God's people. Now, we don't know if these men were royalty. But they were important and wealthy and influential. These men were magi. To us that just sounds important, but to people in Jesus' community, it would have been reason to worry, even though they were rich and powerful. Magi were known to be practitioners of magic and alchemy and astrology. Magi did things that shouldn't be done. They invoked powers that shouldn't be invoked.

They worshipped gods that shouldn't be worshipped. In short, they were idolaters, devil worshippers, pagans, Gentiles. Yes, that's what Gentiles were. The kind of folks who were not God's folks. The kind of folks who did not have God's blessing. The kind of folks good church-goers shouldn't hang out with. Your neighbors could stone you if you did. And yet they are some of the first to recognize who child is. They are the first to bless him. And even though they could get in trouble, Mary and Joseph welcome their blessing. When they arrive, they don't close the drapes and turn off the lights. They don't ask them politely to get off their porch. They welcome these pagan Gentiles even though they have no idea who they are or what they want. And everything about them is foreign and strange. Because God's blessings can come from all kinds of people. What kind of people is God using to bless you?

Second, blessings can come from all kinds of places. Tradition says that the three kings were from different areas of the world. Caspar is said to have been from India or Pakistan. Melchior from Persia. And Balthazar from Arabia. Again no one knows, but tradition insists that these wisemen were from those exotic places at the ends of the earth. They

came from as far away as anyone could imagine. And did you catch where they were from? Pakistan, Arabia, Persia (that would be Iran and Iraq today). Just hearing about those places we might get chills down our spines. We know what kind of places those are. We are afraid of those places; we feel anger and hurt when we think of those places. And believe it or not, Mary and Joseph would have felt the same way about those kinds of places. Magi from the East is what they are called. Mary and Joseph knew what country was out East. They knew where they came from. They remembered with anger and fear as everyone in Israel did. Out east was the place where the Jews had been held in captivity. (Babylon) Mary and Joseph had every reason to reject these men. Because they were from THAT place. Because they were from THAT culture and THAT community. Not any kind of place that God would bless. But God is at work there. Surprise. God's blessings do come from those kinds of places. From what places might God's blessings come to you?

Third, blessings can come from all kinds of things. We read in Matthew that the magi brought three gifts for the child Jesus; gold, frankincense,

and myrrh. Now these presents aren't really very good baby gifts. A good set of teething rings or heck, even a cardboard box would have been better. But these gifts are blessings. Some scholars say that they give them to Jesus because these things were regularly given to kings. They are mentioned elsewhere in the Bible as royal presents. They are expensive and extravagant. Perfect for a perfumed, anointed, gilded life in the royal courts. But others say that these gifts are symbols and that they have spiritual meaning as well. Gold because Jesus will be King of Heaven and Earth. Frankincense because Jesus is High Priest. It was an incense only used in the temple as an offering to God. It was something only the priest would handle. And myrrh because Jesus would die.

Myrrh was used to embalm dead bodies and one day Jesus himself would be sealed in a tomb. St Irenaeus wrote in 2nd century about the gifts of the wisemen: "Gold for a king, frankincense for a God, and myrrh for the suffering redeemer." They are gifts for the child Jesus, blessings. Blessings that will take their toll. Blessings that will require sacrifice. That will cost him his home, his friends, his family and his life. But in the end, because of them we will have life. In the end, because of

them we will be blessed. Somehow God will take the bad, all that is wrong, all that is broken and through it, God will work good. And all the “gifts”, all the bad experiences, the diagnoses and disasters, the accidents and mistakes, god will work through them and make them into blessings. What struggles, what adversities, what unexpected things might be blessings in your life?

Christmastime is about blessings. Jesus has come to bless us. To love us, to claim us. And because of that blessing we bless one another. We bless little children. We bless unexpected visitors. We bless faraway foreign places. We bless the ups and downs this year will bring. We bless this life which God has given.

Remember the blessing of Christmas. Take a piece of chalk home with you today and bless your own homes. Bless them with the unexpected blessing of the Magi. And may our lives be full of God’s grace this year. May our homes be places of peace and hospitality. May God make us a people of blessing to the world.