Holy Happy Hour—January 8, 2026

St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church and Pro-Cathedral

The Epiphany and the Magi

Matthew 2:1–12

Gospel for the Feast of the Epiphany (Year A)

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.

Hymn: "We Three Kings of Orient Are"

1. We three kings of Orient are;
bearing gifts we traverse afar,
field and fountain, moor and mountain,
following yonder star.

Refrain:
O star of wonder, star of light,
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading, still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.

2. **Born a King on Bethlehem's plain,**
gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
over us all to reign. [Refrain]

3. **Frankincense to offer have I;**
incense owns a Deity nigh;
prayer and praising, voices raising,
worshiping God on high. [Refrain]

4. **Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume**
breathes a life of gathering gloom;
sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
sealed in the stone-cold tomb. [Refrain]

5. Glorious now behold him arise;
King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
sounds through the earth and skies.
[Refrain]

"The Seers and the Star" (Excerpt)

Andrew's Version on Substack, by Dean Andrew McGowan, on Dec. 30, 2025

The term "Magi" referred originally to Zoroastrian priests in Persia, but had gradually shifted to being a more general term for soothsayers and magicians, and by the time of Matthew had taken on some negative connotations too (cf. Acts 8:9f). That these particular magi are "from the East" seems to evoke those more ancient and slightly exotic associations, but ancient Christian commentators could not quite agree on what, if any, specific eastern locale was intended. While some aspects of the story as popularly imagined—camels, and kingship, and the number three (there are admittedly three presents in the story)—are absent from the original text, the idea that these seers are from outside the Judean realm, ethnically and religiously, is important. …

Ancient and medieval Christian tradition—not least because of this story— was open to the possibility that practitioners of astrology or magic could reach correct conclusions

about divinely-ordered things, as happens here. Thus the early Christian poet Prudentius (?348-?413) acclaims the child Jesus in his famous Christmas hymn as the one "whom seers and sages sang of old with one accord"; and the Sistine Chapel is adorned with pagan sibyls as well as Hebrew prophets, all seen as witnesses to the truth of the Gospel. Prohibitions of astrology and fortune-telling, both in Israelite religion and later in Christianity, were based not so much on them being fake, but on them being uncontrolled or exploitative. Knowledge of God is not for sale, not a technique or a professional service to be purchased (granted the Church has often fallen into this precise trap too). In this case the astrologers are led by something greater.

The Magi of this story offer "worship" (Matt. 2:2, 11) which may not be as specifically religious as it sounds to the modern ear; kings in general might be "worshipped" (literally, prostrated to/before). The fact that these figures "worship" Jesus is less a statement about their specific religious craft or belief as a confirmation, from sources far beyond the Israelite purview, that this child has a significance beyond the local.

There is also a more specific and very biblical echo in this story, namely a recalling of the long and curious tale of Balaam son of Beor, from the Book of Numbers (22-24). There the king of Moab, Balak, sends for a seer-for-sale—Balaam—who lives by the Euphrates, in "the East" (Num 23:7), to help him ward off the arriving Israelites. By Matthew's time, Balaam was also remembered in Jewish tradition as himself a *magos*. Later—again, by Matthew's time certainly—the magicians and diviners of the Euphrates (Chaldeans) were proverbial practitioners of these dubious arts.

Balaam, in any event, while hired by wicked King Balak to curse the insurgent Hebrews, turns out to speak on behalf of the true God, and finds he can only bless them. After some (to us, seasonally appropriate) comic relief involving angels and donkeys, in the closing act, to Balak's chagrin, Balaam prophesies concerning a future leader:

> *I see him, but not now;*
> *I behold him, but not near—*
> *a star shall come out of Jacob,*
> *and a scepter shall rise out of Israel (Num 24:17).*

So our Matthean group of sorcerers—as we might properly, if uncomfortably, see them—are emulating their forebear Balaam by witnessing, despite a wicked king's frustration, to a new power. None of these biblical sages is for sale either; they are not "spiritual advisers" who will offer false worship to despotic rulers. This true king who is likened to a star, and who holds the scepter of divine authority, will change not just his own home town but the world; and his "worship" will be a gift brought not only by one people, but by all.

Discussion Questions

- The Magi are cultural and religious outsiders, yet they recognize the truth of Christ. Where have you encountered truth from an unexpected source?
- The Magi choose not to cooperate with Herod. Have you felt tension in your life between what is easy—or safe—and what is faithful?
- The Magi follow a star without knowing exactly where it will lead. Where is the season of Epiphanytide inviting you to venture? What in your life (personally, professionally, spiritually) do you feel draw to explore?