

## “The King of the Jews”

Matthew 2:1-12

The Day of Epiphany is a special day in the life of the Church because it represents so much of our life in Christ. An epiphany is when that which was once hidden or unknown is revealed. It's the “Ah-ha” moment. Christ must be made known. Christ must be revealed. The Day of Epiphany is one of the chief anchor points as we tell the story of God's interaction with His people.

Originally, this was a day to tell many accounts of God being revealed as man – that God in man is made manifest. Originally, this was the celebration of the birth of Jesus, and His Baptism, and His first miracle at Cana, and the coming of the Wise Men. There is a lot to celebrate today. The earliest documented reference to this celebration was in 361 A.D.

As the church calendar spread out, so that we could devote more time and celebrate all of these events of Jesus life, Christmas is set apart and Epiphany is an entire season. The Eastern Orthodox churches use a little different calendar than we do, but in the Western churches, the Day of Epiphany is now primarily devoted to the coming of the Wise Men.

And we really don't even know that much about the Wise Men. We don't know how many actually came. The tradition of three of them arose because of the three gifts. Their traditional names: Gaspar, Balthazar, and Melchior first appeared on a 6<sup>th</sup> Century Mosaic in Ravenna, Italy. They

are not “kings”, even though that concept makes for a great Christmas carol.

The best word used to describe them is “Magi.” The Magi were a class of priests, astronomers, and astrologers. They were influential advisors of the king in Babylon and later in Persia. When I see the Magi come and bring gifts to Jesus, I see the seamless connection of the Old and New Testaments. The prophet Daniel, exiled to Babylon, serving under King Nebuchadnezzar, was made the presiding officer over all the Magi.

Daniel was the one who could actually interpret the dreams of the king. And he was the one who could read the handwriting on the wall that told another king that his reign was coming to an end. And he was a devout man of God who prayed to the Lord every day – even when it was illegal to do so. And when the Lord kept Daniel safe in the lion’s den, the next day, when the Magi who conspired against him were thrown in, they and their families, and the lions killed them before their feet hit the ground – something tells me that the other Magi would be paying attention to what Daniel was saying.

And you read the prophet Daniel – it is not a story about a guy in a lion’s den – that is such a small part of Daniel’s story. Daniel, the leader of the Magi, interacts with and advises several generations of kings from Babylon and Persia. The book of Daniel tells of how God can even use Gentile kings like Nebuchadnezzar and Darius to proclaim God’s power and salvation.

After Daniel emerged safely from the lion's den, King Darius wrote: "I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for He is the living God, enduring forever; His kingdom shall never be destroyed, and His dominion shall be to the end" [Dan. 6:26]. That is what King Darius decreed. The Magi would be paying attention.

Daniel tells of how God will restore His people from exile and ultimately will save them with the coming of the real King of the Jews. 500 years after Daniel, the star appears, and it appears the Magi were still paying attention.

However, upon their journey to Israel, the Magi find themselves standing before a king who is not interested in acknowledging that anyone else should be called the "King of the Jews." King Herod was not going to tremble or fear before the God of Daniel. Let me give you a little background on Herod. Herod was not a Jew; he was Idumean, that is an Edomite – a descendant of Esau – a pretender to the birth-rite of Israel.

So that no one could challenge his throne, Herod killed his wife Mariamne (even though she was his favorite wife). He killed her brother Aristobulus (who was the high priest). He killed his mother-in-law (I guess for being a mother-in-law); he killed three of his sons for fear that they would want the throne before he died. Herod has done all of this by the time the Magi come visiting. Herod dies a year or two after Jesus is born.

Just before Herod dies, he orders the arrest of the most distinguished citizens in Jerusalem, imprisons them, and gives the order that, when he dies, they are to be executed so that there will be great weeping and

mourning in the streets of Jerusalem and no one will celebrate his death. Herod was a real piece of work.

And in walk the Magi saying, “Where is He who is born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star . . . and we have come to worship Him.” And all of Jerusalem was troubled at hearing this. Of course they were troubled; Herod was told of a new king being born. Someone was going to die.

Herod was determined that this King must die. That was the one thing Herod had right. This King must die, but it is not yet His time. First, the Son of the Living God promised throughout the Old Testament, foretold by Daniel, decreed by King Darius – God, in flesh makes His dwelling among us and, as a child, He is revealed to Magi from the east. Gazing at the stars led the Magi to the false, wannabe king of the Jews.

It was only when Scripture revealed Him did the Magi know where to actually look for and find that child who was the Son of God. When that child becomes a man, He is revealed as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And He continues to be revealed here. He continues to be revealed in His Word. Searching for Him anywhere else will only lead you to a false king. He is revealed here in His Word and in flesh and blood under the form of bread and wine. We no longer need to ask “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” He is here, and He has promised to remain with us, even to the end of the age. Amen.