

by Therese Sherlock, CSJ

Set a lighted candle at the center of your group with an open bible near it. Sing the first verse of “We Three Kings.”

**LEADER:** We meet you, Jesus, in the crib at Bethlehem.

**ALL:** Your light is strong; your love is near.

**LEADER:** We meet you, Jesus, in the stranger at work.

**ALL:** Your light is strong; your love is near.

**LEADER:** We meet you, Jesus, in the stranger in our parish.

**ALL:** Your light is strong; your love is near.

**LEADER:** We meet you, Jesus, in your word today.

**ALL:** Your light is strong; your love is near.

The magi follow a star. In cities with colleges and astronomers, community calendars often invite the public to lectures on the star of Bethlehem. Perhaps scientists will one day chart with certainty a spectacular heavenly event that captivated these diviners and led them to Jesus.

Even without such proof their search for God in the visible, natural world enchants me. This is the world we experience. This is the world

# SUNDAY

by SUNDAY



we see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. This is the world that engages our affections and nightly turns our hearts toward morning and waking anew. We live in its rhythms and by its lights.

Creation, not the written book of Genesis, is the first source of revelation. Creation manifests God’s life-giving and sustaining presence. Today we follow the stars with the Hubble telescope, which has confirmed Einstein’s theory that we live in an expanding universe.

We are seekers still like the magi. Physics has taken us within the atom. Biology has decoded the human genome

and learned how molecules splice and proteins fold. In our world God acts not only in the beginning but in all 13.8 billion years of our unfolding. The God of our cosmic story is not fixed and static but dynamic and life-giving.

God comes to us from the future as we experience the lure within us to become all we can be, a drive we share with all beings. In our relationships with each other and our partnerships with Earth, evolution continues. In Jesus God shows us all we can become.

● **When has the mystery in which we live astounded you?**

# GOSPEL

## Foreigners from the East come to worship Jesus.

**NARRATOR 1:** After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod, magi from the east arrived one day in Jerusalem.

**MAGI:** Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.

**NARRATOR 2:** At this King Herod became greatly disturbed, and with him all Jerusalem. He summoned the chief priests and the scribes.

**HEROD:** Where is the Messiah to be born?

**PRIEST:** In Bethlehem of Judea.

**SCRIBE:** Here is what the prophet has written: "And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means

least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

**NARRATOR 1:** Herod talked to the magi and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem.

**HEROD:** Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have discovered something, report to me so that I may go and offer him homage, too.

**NARRATOR 2:** After their audience with the king, the magi set out. The star went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. They were



A nativity scene from Notre Dame in Paris.

overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, found the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

**NARRATOR 1:** They received a message in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route.

Matthew 2.1-12

## The magi model faith for us seekers.

The gospel tells us little about the foreigners who come to worship Jesus. Matthew's story calls them astrologers, or magi, a kind of combination of scholar and soothsayer or diviner. They read the stars to look for the hand of God. When they discover a star they have never seen before, they leave their homes in the East to see what it means.

What the gospel does not tell us about magi, we have added over the centuries. We have made the astrologers into kings. Because the gospel mentions three gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—we count them

three. We have given them names, ages, and skin color. Melchior is the old man with white hair and a white beard; Balthazar is young and fair; Gaspar is black. We haven't made one of them a woman, although many think there must have been a woman along since they stopped to ask directions!

Why have we added so much detail to these stories and left the shepherds such a plain group? Maybe because the strangers take such a big risk in following the star. They leave the comforts of their homes, take a long trip, and outwit a king anxious for his crown. They don't know where

they are going or what they will find when they get there. In other words, they are model believers and seekers of truth.

Faith is always a venture into the unknown. Faith is letting the Spirit come into our comfortable lives and shake us up. These magi follow in the footsteps of Abraham and Sarah, who also left their own land to follow God's revelation. The magi find Jesus by using their talents and the science available to them.

● Where have you journeyed to transcendent meaning for your life? What did you find?



● What takes most of your thinking, planning, wishing, and hoping time and energy? Are you finding God there?

**D**id the visit of the astrologers really happen? Most scholars don't think so. Rather, the story of their visit is early Christians' way to imbue Jesus' birth with as much significance as his death and resurrection. The birth stories of other rulers, such as Alexander the Great, include celestial phenomena. In Israel's tradition, an earlier diviner from the East named Balaam prophesies, "A star shall come forth out of Jacob, and a scepter arise out of Israel" (Numbers 24.17).

More importantly, it is Matthew and only Matthew who tells the magi story and Matthew who ponders Jesus' rejection by so many of his own and acceptance by Gentile peoples. By the time Matthew writes—the A.D. 80s—Paul and other missionaries have founded Christian communities in Gentile cities around the Mediterranean area. Also, the Romans have put down the



Jewish uprising that culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple and the siege of Masada.

**T**hese cataclysms have repercussions in every phase of Jewish life. The temple as a unifying place of worship is gone. Jewish men and women who believe in Jesus become less welcome in synagogues. The story of the magi, which Matthew puts at Jesus' birth, foreshadows in a literary way the split between Jews who follow Jesus and other Jews.

By their appearance in Jerusalem, the astrologers offer Herod and the priests and elders two choices—come with us to see the new king or reject him. Herod doesn't show

his hand at once, but later we see his intent is murderous. Herod wants to keep everything comfortable for himself.

The priests and elders of the people don't follow the magi to Bethlehem. We can assume a new revelation of God does not interest

them. Those who represent palace and temple care more about keeping their positions secure.

Who is to say what any of us would do? Who wants to leave the comfort of the status quo? The magi ask us a faith question. Can we see God beckoning us to new lands and new life?

Matthew concludes this story by telling us that upon learning that Herod had set a trap for them, the astrologers went home by another way. Being strangers, they had no need or obligation to make peace with the powers that be. They didn't have to accept Herod's terms. They didn't give up in despair and bitterness. They just found another way home.

- When have you clung to the past beyond all reason?
- How do you hope and imagine God coming to us from the future?
- What is an interest that never lets you go, that you continue to pursue?

## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

- Resolve to bus, compost, use less water, plant trees, eat less meat, wear sweaters inside—act to protect Earth, our common home.
- Make an Epiphany journey by riding public transportation to make contact with a broad cross-section of the people who live where you live. Who rides the buses or trains?

**T**he book of Isaiah includes writings from at least three different periods. The passage from third Isaiah which we read for the Feast of the Epiphany comes from an era when many exiles have returned to their homeland to rebuild—400s B.C. The prophet envisions Jerusalem and the people of Israel as a light to other nations.

The people, those who did not choose to stay in Babylon where many Jews had become comfortable and successful, came back to a land in ruins. The Babylonians so thoroughly destroyed the temple that Solomon built that not until Jesus' time did a leader attempt to create a building of like beauty and majesty. Finding the temple in ruins, the remnant that returned after the Babylonian exile had to rethink what stood at the center of their lives.

With sacrificial temple worship no longer possible during the exile, teachers collected and wrote down Israel's traditions. Synagogue services centered on these written traditions. Meditation or reflection on the law of God became the usual mode of worship.

These new habits of worshiping express Israel's realization that God is bigger than they had previously recognized. Living with the Babylonians gave them the experience of discovering that other peoples seek God. Third Isaiah reflects Israel's growing

awareness that the teaching they received as God's chosen people is for sharing with the whole world.

**Jerusalem is a light to the nations.**

**Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!  
Your light has come,  
God's glory shines upon you.  
See, darkness covers the earth;  
thick clouds cover the people.  
But upon you God shines;  
over you appears God's glory.**

**Nations shall walk by your light,  
and kings by your shining  
radiance.**

**Raise your eyes and look about;  
they all gather and come to you.  
Your sons come from afar,  
and your daughters in the arms of  
their nurses.**

**Then you shall be radiant  
at what you see, your heart  
will throb and overflow,  
for the riches of the sea will be  
emptied out before you;  
the wealth of nations  
shall be brought to you.  
Caravans of camels shall fill you,  
dromedaries from Midian and  
Ephah.**

**All from Sheba shall come  
bearing gold and frankincense,  
and proclaiming God's praise.**

Isaiah 60.1-6

- Whose search for God has surprised you?
- What have you learned about God from someone you may have thought was godless?
- What have you learned from the faith of Jewish people today? From people of other religions?

**PRAY**

Pray together using Sunday's second reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

**LEADER 1:** Here is my message, says Paul: in Christ Jesus, the Gentiles are now co-heirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise.

**LEADER 2:** Here is my message: in Christ Jesus, women are co-heirs with men, members of the same body and sharers of the promise.

**LEADER 3:** Here is my message: in Christ Jesus, children are co-heirs with adults, deserving of the food, health care, and education they need to grow up in the same body, as sharers of the promise.

**LEADER 4:** Here is my message: in Christ Jesus, the stranger is co-heir with the members of the establishment, sharer of the promise.

**LEADER 1:** Here is my message:

*Give time for anyone who wishes to add prayers.*

**All: We praise you, Jesus, for making us members of the same body and sharers of the promise. Give us courage to act as brothers and sisters, and not as strangers. Amen.**



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