

### Call to Worship

The Incarnation means God in the Flesh, God with Us. The truth of the nativity is that though we could not come to God, God came to us, embraced us, and saved us in Christ. We don't have to work hard to attempt to climb up to God; God has in Jesus Christ climbed down to us.

**The light of Christ is brightly shining, calling all from far and near to kneel before the throne. At the turning of the year, at the pivot of a season, come – gather together to praise God.**

### Prayer of Invocation

**O Holy Child of Bethlehem, who brought the light of heaven to earth, shine upon us as we bow before you. Shine in our darkness we pray, that we may arise as new people. Illumine our lives with the holy light of your presence within us, that we may be windows to the world through which you may be seen and known.**

### THE WORD

Matthew 2:1-11

Coming of the Magi

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

*You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

### LIVING THE WORD

Today we celebrate Epiphany. It comes at the end of the 12 days of Christmas, on January 6<sup>th</sup>, but before next Sunday, so for us today is the day. Epiphany is a big celebration in some places: In Spain and in Portugal, the cake, which is ring-shaped, contains both a small figurine of the baby Jesus, or another surprise depending on the region, and an actual dry broad bean. The one who gets the figurine is crowned, but whoever gets the bean has to pay the value of the cake to the person who originally bought it.

In France and Belgium, a cake containing a small figure of the baby Jesus is shared within the family. Whoever gets the baby is crowned king or queen for the remainder of the holiday and wears a cardboard crown purchased with the cake.

In México they also have the same ring-shaped cake called the Kings Bagel, with figurines inside it. Whoever gets a figurine is supposed to organize and be the host of the family celebration for the feast on February 2 to commemorate the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple.

In New Orleans, Louisiana, parts of southern Texas, and surrounding regions, a similar ring-shaped cake known as a "King Cake" traditionally becomes available in bakeries from Epiphany to Mardi Gras, which is the time before Ash Wednesday.

The baby Jesus figurine is inserted into the cake from underneath, and the person who gets the slice with the figurine is expected to buy or bake the next King Cake. There is wide variation among the types of pastry that may be called a King Cake, but most are a baked cinnamon-flavored twisted dough with thin frosting and additional sugar on top in the traditional Mardi Gras colors of gold, green and purple. Mardi Gras-style beads and doubloons may be included as well.

Epiphany is the celebration of the wise men's arrival after the birth of Jesus; it is a celebration of their gifts and it is the celebration of the miracle of the Star that led them to the child. But particularly it is the twinkle, that we all-of-the sudden see hanging on a star, that must have been there, yet we had never noticed until this moment.

Epiphany is a moment of enlightenment in our minds, that we now have a new understanding. For the shepherds it was a special baby born in a stable; in the midst of their environment had come, God in the flesh. For the wise men it was the end of a journey to find a predicted king, but when they found him they were ever more amazed and had that epiphany moment. I have had some epiphany moments doing the research on the Advent and Christmas hymns this season, maybe you have also as they have been shared...So let's seek something new in the hymns of Epiphany:

### **245 The First Noel**

This is a traditional classical English carol, most likely from the 18th century. The word *Noel* comes from the French language, meaning "Christmas", and from the Latin word *natalis* meaning "birthday".

It is thought to be a version of an earlier melody sung in a church west gallery. The term derives from the wooden galleries which were constructed at the west end of churches during the 18th century upon which the choir would perform. Victorians disapproved of these galleries, and most were removed during restorations in the 19th century.

The earlier west gallery version of this hymn was entitled "*The First O Well*".

*O well, O well, the Angels did say to shepherds there in the fields did lay;  
Late in the night a-folding their sheep, A winter's night, both cold and bleak.  
**Refrain:** O well, O well, O well, O well, Born is the King of Israel.*

For us to sing 'O well', feels like we are giving up on the birth not celebrating a birthday, so at some point in the history of time and space the French 'Noel' was adopted into the song. Now it is like singing happy birthday to the King of Israel. Word translations can make all the difference in how we celebrate... This hymn simply lays out the map and journey of the shepherds and the wise men to the birthday event.

So what about these 'wise men?' Actually they were the Magi, popularly referred to as *wise men* and *kings*. The term refers to a priestly social group of religion originating in Persia which today is Iran. As part of their religion, these priests paid particular attention to the stars and gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science.

The identification of the Magi as kings is linked to Old Testament prophecies that have the Messiah being worshipped by kings in Isaiah 60:3, Psalm 72:10, and Psalm 68:29. Early readers reinterpreted Matthew in

light of these prophecies and elevated the Magi to kings. Traditions identify a variety of different names for the Magi. In the Western Christian church they have been commonly known as: Melchior, a Persian scholar; Caspar, an Indian scholar and Balthazar, an Arabian scholar.

A tradition in most of Central Europe and in German areas involves writing the initials of the three kings' names, *C M B*, on the main door of the home in chalk, to confer blessings on the occupants for the New Year. The writing is done at some point between Christmas and Epiphany. In Catholic parts of Germany and in Austria, this is done by so-called 'star singers', groups of three elementary school age children, dressed up as the Magi, carrying the star and singing Christmas carols. They are chaperoned by an adult who stays in the background. In exchange for writing the initials, they collect money for a specific charity project in the third world designated by the Catholic Church.

Some of you may be familiar with another Epiphany Hymn that begins: "I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing in on Christmas Morn, on Christmas Morn." I did some research. What I found was that there is no way that ships can get to Bethlehem, because the closest body of water is the Dead Sea, ten miles east or the Mediterranean which is 30 miles west; Tough travel through mountains either way for a ship. But as songs are often written in poetry or sometimes code, there can be hidden messages there.

So what is the meaning of this song? One online source said: "*The song was originally composed by traveling English minstrels. The original song talked about the three skulls of the three wise men being carried on three ships into Cologne Cathedral in Germany.*"

Cologne Cathedral is one of several traditions on where the remains of the Magi are located, although none of the traditions is considered as an established fact or even as particularly likely by secular history. Marco Polo claimed that he was shown the three tombs of the Magi south of Tehran in the 1270s.

Polo wrote: "In Persia is the city of Saba, from which the Three Magi set out and in this city they are buried, in three very large and beautiful monuments, side by side. And above them there is a square building, beautifully kept. The bodies are still entire, with hair and beard remaining." That's pretty good for remains that were then 1300 years old!

When I was attending Seminary at Duke Divinity School, we had a wise professor named Mickey Efir, who would at this point say to us: "You pays your money and you take your choices." So here is the point I think: Time changes things, including lyrics and history according to who tells the story. Much of what we now have, cannot be verified any longer. Does it change the fact that Jesus was born for our sakes? No, not at all, the real fact is that the stories make the event seem even richer.

It also makes it easier to understand how important this birth story is to the movement of Christianity around the world. Many different cultures and country locations celebrate the story differently, but the basis of the story always remains the same.

**2095 Star Child** - Shirley Murray, New Zealand's premier hymn writer, first introduced the words to "Star-Child" on her Christmas card in 1994. Dr. Carlton Young, a teacher, editor, composer and conductor, with the unique distinction of serving as editor of two revisions of the hymnals for Methodists: the one from 1966 and the 1989 hymnal which we still use.

Within 24 hours, Dr Young responded to Murray's Card and composed a simple lilting tune to the socially conscious text. Murray explained the creation of her poem like this: "*The carol grew out of increasing concern at the market values dictating our welfare system, now creating more and more 'social reject.'*" Sometimes it is amazing how simple words, and a simple tune can carry such powerful impact. "*This year, this year, let the day arrive, when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive.*"

The hymn most notably associated with Epiphany for us may be: **254 We Three Kings**

This is a Christmas carol written by the Reverend John Henry Hopkins, Jr., who wrote both the lyrics and the music. Hopkins, an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church, was instrumental in organizing an elaborate holiday pageant, which featured this hymn, for the students of the General Theological Seminary in New York City in 1857 while serving as the seminary's music director.

The story we find within the words of this hymn emphasize the gifts that were given. Three gifts are explicitly identified in the Gospel of Matthew: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Many different theories of the meaning and symbolism of the gifts have been brought forward. While gold is fairly obviously explained, frankincense, and particularly myrrh, are much more obscure.

All three gifts are ordinary offerings and gifts given to a king. Myrrh being commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense as a perfume, and gold as a valuable. The three gifts had a spiritual meaning : gold as a symbol of kingship on earth; frankincense, an incense, as a symbol of God; and myrrh, an embalming oil, as a symbol of sacrifice and death, given as to one who was mortal. The last verse includes a summary of the interpretation: "Glorious now behold Him arise/King and God and sacrifice."

In our lives, we may have many epiphany moments: the first time you see a tiny baby; the moment you suddenly 'get' how physics or algebra works; your surprise at seeing something mystical, that just has to be a miracle; the knowledge that finally comes when you realize that someone loves you more than themselves; or even learning something new about an old favorite hymn you have been singing for years.

Skeptics very seldom have epiphanies. The wise men put forth great effort to seek a miracle. They had to also opened their minds to, and 'think greater' for, the possibility of whatever they might find. "*O... Star of wonder, star of light, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.*" This line reminds us that Christ's light still shines, it is still hanging on a star waiting for us to notice it. Epiphanies still happen, as we realize new things.

Today this church can celebrate an epiphany: when we began to 'think greater' last fall, we were able to bring people together in ministry and yesterday we ended 2016 financially in the black— this includes a year in which we did some major building work here fixing the flat roof, and other smaller fixes as well. That is all well and good, but in addition, new mission projects helped us reach farther into our community and into our world.

What will 2017 bring for us? Only God may know, but now we see who we can be when we open ourselves like the wise men did toward the possibilities and opportunities God has ready for us.