



Postlude

Week 2: We Three Kings

Brian Mattson - 01/04/2026

We have turned the page on the calendar from 2025 to 2026. Today, we turn the page on the church calendar again. We are leaving Christmastide, the 12 Days of Christmas, and are now celebrating Epiphany. This is the Sunday we remember the visit of the Magi, the three wise men, to the Christ-child in Bethlehem. After this Sunday, we enter into what's called the first period of Ordinary Time, between Epiphany and Lent in mid-February.

For the liturgically un-initiated, it feels like we've been changing seasons quite a bit since the start of Advent, and that's true. If it all seems strange and confusing, here's a little diagram of just exactly what we're talking about when we talk about the seasons of the church.

[LITURGICAL CALENDAR](#)

So what the heck exactly is Epiphany and why is it important? Here's a great summary from our denomination: From the Greek word meaning "manifestation," Epiphany commemorates the revelation of Jesus to the world. Today, the holiday is most associated with the arrival of the Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), though it historically also celebrated Jesus' baptism and first miracle at the Wedding at Cana. All of these events are

grouped together because they mark different occasions in which other people see who Jesus is or see his power and divinity “manifested.”

It’s become our modern tradition to remember the wise men today, though they are typically included in the larger story of the Nativity in all the Christmas pageants and cantatas. Do you know that term, cantata? It’s another one of those words that is mostly used in church settings. It’s a special musical celebration that was popular in Lutheran Germany in the 18th century. Johann Sebastian Bach was the most notable composer of Church Cantatas, which helped retell the stories from scripture around special liturgical seasons, mostly Christmas and Easter.

At the church where Jessica and I grew up, there was always a big Christmas Cantata every year. There were a few children in it every year, but mostly it was adults who volunteered to perform. They acted and sang the story of the Nativity every year. It was a big production at our church. The choir learned new music. There was a full orchestra. There were stage lights and painted sets to transport the audience into the story. There were costumes and makeup. It was the real deal, in as much as our church could produce the real deal.

It was such a contrast to our little no-rehearsal children’s pageant. Here at The Downtown Church, we use a script, but it’s really unscripted. There’s no music or performing, so to speak. It’s just kids being kids and reminding us that the story of Jesus’s birth in a manger in Bethlehem is a story for all ages.

For the annual Christmas Cantata at Wesley UMC, there was a 20-page script with stage plots and directions. We spent weeks rehearsing our lines and the songs. Jessica and I were both asked to be in it one year, me as Joseph and Jessica as Elizabeth. All the other main characters

were there: Mary, Angels, Herod, Shepherds, and those familiar three wise men.

Now, you might think that a scripted and rehearsed production like this might be smoother than our no-rehearsal children's version, but you would be mistaken. This was a ragtag group of mostly inexperienced actors and musicians doing their best to retell the story. The year we were in the cast, one of our dear friends, Bill McCurry, was also in the cast. He was one of the three wise men. And whenever those three wise men were rehearsing their scene with the rest of us, it turned into the three stooges. Their lines, though they were not sung, still had to follow the rhythm of the music. And each of the three wise men's lines relied on the others getting the rhythm and timing just right or it would throw the others off. And boy did they throw each other off the timing.

Jessica and I were in tears several times as the entire cast had to watch these three volunteer wise men come down the center aisle in these outlandish costumes, kneel down and recite their lines. Jess and I still giggle and laugh about it. The lines went something like, "We have come from afar, following the star, that will lead us to the newborn king. Can you tell us where he is? Can you show us where he lives? So we can pay him homage....yada, yada, yada..."

No one is really for sure just exactly what the lines were supposed to be, because I'm not sure they ever got them right. And to make matters worse, one of the wise men had bad knees so he would sometimes get stuck in a kneeling position, which further imperiled the rhythm and timing for the others. But hey, that's showbusiness.

So let's talk a little more about the wise men, or kings, or Magi. This year at our no-rehearsal pageant, there were five of them. Sometimes there are more. Sometimes less. It just depends on how many kids pick out the costumes that night. Most Christmas pageants have three,

though we don't really know how many there were. Usually, there are three represented because there were three gifts, but scripture isn't definitive on their number.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east 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 magi 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 in the east, 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.

- Matthew 2:1-12

The word Magi has been translated as wise men, kings, and astrologers. They may have been priests of the ancient Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism. A key component of this religion was reading the stars and astrology in general, which would be one reason why they may have been intrigued by, and chose to follow, the Star of Bethlehem.

Their association as kings happened early on in Christianity, in the 3rd century, and they were even given names in the 8th century. This is from Encyclopedia Britannica:

As early as the 3rd century they were considered to be kings, probably interpreted as the fulfillment of the prophecy in Psalms 72:11 ("May all kings fall down before him"). In about the 8th century the names of three Magi—Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa—appear in a chronicle known as the *Excerpta latina barbari*. They have become known most commonly as Balthasar, Melchior, and Casper. According to Western church tradition, Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Casper as a king of India.

Regardless of just exactly who these wise men were, we can learn a few things from their example today. The first is that they saw something significant and decided to start a journey. These astrologers were convinced that the skies would reveal something special, and when they saw it, they were inspired to go searching. Have you been looking for a sign to go on a new journey? Have you wondered why the answers you are looking for aren't clear? Sometimes we just have to go on a search. We have to make plans to move. Go. Travel. Maybe you've been on this journey of faith, but are looking for a new spark or direction. Go deeper. Go wider. Get weirder. I find that going in new

directions challenges and reshapes my faith in positive ways. God is not scared of your questions or pursuit of wisdom. That is a holy pilgrimage, but you have to start walking at some point. Otherwise you are just a signpost on the way.

The second thing we can learn is that these Magi had to go somewhere new and unknown. These travelers risked something to gain something. This doesn't mean they went gambling. This means they got out of their comfort zone and off-road. We all need to explore and take trails we haven't walked before. Are you just staying in the comfortable and familiar paths of faith? Have you shaken things up lately? Has it been awhile since you found your faith and spiritual sense of wonder renewed? There is no better time than the new year to try something new. Read a book. Listen to a podcast. Meditate on the Psalms. We have recommendations to give if you need something new.

The last lesson is that they offered something of themselves. They gave away gifts. And although the specific gifts they brought seem strange to us now, except for the gold, each one tells a little story about who Jesus was to become. William Barclay writes that the first gift—gold—is the gift for a king. By offering gold, this wise man was relaying the idea that Jesus was the King of Men, and kings reign over people. But Jesus's kingdom was not one of force or might, but of love. We are to submit to this kind of kingship. We are all under the rule of love.

The second gift—frankincense—is the gift for a priest. Frankincense was used in Temple worship and sacrifice, and in essence, what a priest does to open the way to God for mankind through worship and prayer. The Latin word for priest is pontifex, which means bridge-builder. That is what Jesus did as our "priest." He showed the way to enter the very presence of God.

The third gift—myrrh—is the gift for those near death. Myrrh was used to embalm bodies. Jesus came to offer us life, and ultimately his death.

Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one who was to die—these were the gifts of the wise men, and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the Savior of men.

- William Barclay

These three wise men—whether they were kings, astrologers, or something else— offer us something more than just cast members in the nativity. They provide a beautiful example to follow as we journey towards knowing Jesus more. It is adorable watching our kids wear the costumes of the kings and taking part in our pageant on Christmas Eve. But those three wise men at my church's Christmas Cantata were memorable in their own way.

It was a bunch of mostly middle-aged people, some with absolutely zero acting abilities or rhythm (or timing, in the case of the wise men) volunteering their effort in service to the greater good. Helping tell the story again and again. They were offering themselves, and whether they considered it a gift or not, the people seeing it for the first time considered it one. The families who cheered them on from the pews saw it as a gift, in the very least of their time and effort.

What do you have that could be considered a great gift? There are more things to give than money. Are you a listener, a doer, a planner, a stay-up-all-nighter? Are you a singer, a techie, a teacher, a cleaner? Exercising any of these gifts, or any other gift, points back to something. Because offering gifts is a selfless act that makes a little

more light and love in the world; it's one of the marks of a Christian. So what gifts could you offer in 2026?

When Claire Cobb worked in the front office here at the church, she had a poster up on the wall with three camels and the wise men riding upon them descending to Bethlehem. At the top was the popular Christian maxim Wise Men Still Seek Him. I always loved that saying and the idea behind it. And I agree with its two-fold sentiment—both that wise people seek Jesus, and seeking Jesus makes you wise. But I'd love to have a second half to the statement. Maybe the wise still seek him and also show other people the way.

How can you embody the spirit of the Magi this year? What does your journey look like? Where can you go to challenge and grow your faith? And what gifts do you have to offer that point others back to the love of God lived out by a baby born in Bethlehem?