The Gift of the Magi
January 6, 2013, Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12
Rebekah M. Hutto, The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York

God of Promise and mysterious Light, be with us this day as we journey in our faith, to meet your Gift, your Son Jesus Christ. Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to see his light shining in the darkness. Give us courage and hope along our way, as your light continues to shine in our path, leading us to discipleship in Christ’s name. Amen.

This past fall, the children in our Worship in Motion ministry had the opportunity to get to know and spend time with each one of our four ministers. Some of you may be aware that there’s quite a lot of dancing and movement in Tuesday afternoon’s Worship and Motion program, and yes, all four of your pastors willingly participated in these activities. But along with dancing, our pastors also spent time with the children, telling them about themselves and what they remember about growing up in the church. I asked each one of them to share one of their favorite memories from their childhood, and the children listened eagerly as they got to know their pastors.

When it was my turn to share, at the end of November, I talked to the children about my experience participating in my home church’s Christmas pageant each year. Like at Brick, you had to wait until you were older before you could take a lead role in the story. So, I asked the children to guess my favorite role in the pageant and who they thought I wanted to be in the story. Several said Mary, some suggested the angels, and one or two thought I wanted to be a shepherd. But no, I was eagerly awaiting the role of “wiseman” or “wisewoman” as I liked to call it. After all, the Magi had the best costumes, they got to process down the center aisle during the hymn, and they didn’t have a whole lot of lines to memorize. Due to

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faithful waiting on my part, and a little begging, I got to be a “wisewoman” twice in my home church’s pageant.

There’s something about the Christmas Magi that has caused Christians from all ages to find them fascinating and intriguing. As early as the second century, ancient art depicts illustrations of the Magi at the manger rather than the lowly shepherds. More traditions and imaginative details have been added to their story than to the events of any other characters at the manger scene. For many of us, the Magi are some of the most fascinating people to meet the Christ child.

Today, Epiphany Sunday, celebrates the story of these foreign travelers and the significance they recognize in the birth of God’s Son. But before we talk about their role in the story, let’s first clear up some of the specifics in the text. Although we often call them Wisemen or Kings, it’s probably more appropriate to think of them as Magi—a group of people that could have included magicians, fortune tellers, astronomers or even pagan priests. Their exact profession is unknown, but the connection to the star in the east indicates that they might have been astrologers who sought wisdom from nature.

Moreover, although we often think of them as a group of three, we don’t actually know how many Magi are in the story. We’ve always assumed there were three because of the mention of the three gifts, but there could have been more or less. Some non-biblical resources have even gone so far as to give the three men names and assign them three distinct ethnicities. But we don’t actually know their origin either, only that they were “from the east” which could have meant Persia, Arabia, Babylon, or maybe even further away.

Lastly, because of the length of their travel time, the Magi wouldn’t have actually arrived at the manger in time to sit alongside the animals and the shepherds. We include them in our Christmas crèches between the shepherds and the angels because they have a significant role to play in Jesus’ birth, but the Gospel writers never have them all together. Matthew tells the story of the Magi, while Luke gives us the story of the shepherds and angels. Even with the fastest camels, it would’ve taken years after Christ’s birth for the Magi to travel westward to Bethlehem.

Some of you may have already known these details. If not, I hope I haven’t taken away anything from the beloved Christmas pageant that you remember. If anything

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I hope I’ve emphasized just how much we adore these foreigner travelers, because why else would we add so much extra, non-Biblical information to their story, other than the fact that they fascinate us? And they should. Because, more than anyone else in the Christmas story, these Magi are who we Gentile Christians should aspire to be.

Let me clarify that last statement: In their actions and piety, these Magi are the first to bow down and worship the Christ, and in case you didn’t notice, they’re not Jewish. In fact, they’re the only non-Jewish members of Jesus’ welcoming party. They’re Gentiles, like most of us. And the more I’ve studied their actions, the more humbled I am by their behavior. As fellow Gentiles, they offer us faithful examples to follow.

First, they travel to Jesus to pay him “homage.” The text includes this word twice, once in their own admission and a second time in their behavior once they see Jesus. They travel a long distance searching for the king who’s been revealed to them in order to worship and adore him. When they arrive, they physically lower themselves before him, kneeling as one rightly does before their Lord. Worship is what we’re all called to as Christians, in fact it’s the primary response we’re called to offer in gratitude to our loving God. And here we find foreigners bowing down to worship the Son of Israel’s God.

But they don’t just offer worship. In their actions, these Magi show us what it is to worship and follow this Jesus. When they first reach Jerusalem they find themselves at the palace of Herod, the Roman-backed king of the Jews. Yet somehow they know to ask for the real King of the Jews. Faced with Herod’s wealth and power, the Magi ignore these temptations and continue their search for the infant King. After they find him, they could have given up Jesus’ location to Herod, who wanted him dead. But rather than follow the orders of the political and incredibly powerful ruler of the day, the Magi listen to God’s voice in a dream, a dream telling them to hide the identity of the child whom they worship. As a second act of faith, the Magi follow God’s voice and reject the power of Herod; they decide whose voice to listen to and whose voice to ignore.

And then there are the gifts that the Magi offer to Jesus. A lot of theories have been offered as to why these three gifts are presented to Jesus. Gold as a symbol of royal wealth and power, frankincense as a sign of divinity, and myrrh for holy anointing.

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and sacrifice are just some of the reasons that have been put forward. And although these explanations are valid, let’s back up to the actual profession of these men. What if they really are magicians? What if they spend their days speaking incantations and casting spells? If that’s true, then they’ve just offered the symbols of their trade over to a new king; in a sense they’re handing over their old ways of life. These Magi are giving their wealth and their pagan rituals over to the new God they worship. First they worship Jesus, next they deny the power of Herod, and now they lower themselves in front of Jesus and, through their gifts, offer him their lives in service.

Finally, all of this brings them joy. The text says that the Magi were “overwhelmed with joy”\textsuperscript{1} when they saw the star stop over the house. This translation softens it a bit, because in Greek it says they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”\textsuperscript{2} combining verb, adverb, and adjective into a scene of immense happiness. What is it that the Magi have found that brings them such elation? Is it that their search is over? That their lives are forever changed? Maybe that they’ve found a Lord with true power?

This joy, more than anything else they offer, is the gift of the Magi to us this day. Whatever the source of this joy is, our call is to learn from these men exactly what it is that brings them joy. Every year Christmas offers us peace and the New Year a fresh start, but I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge that joy has been hard to come by these past few months. More than at any other time in my ministry, it has been tangible how hard the holidays were for so many of us this year. Tragedy struck an Upper West Side family in October through the violent death of two their children. Hurricane Sandy destroyed our city and surrounding area. Then, a week before Christmas, 26 people were murdered maliciously in Newtown, Connecticut. And as a cap to a horrible couple of months, the year ended with fighting, name calling and bickering over government budgets and an incorrigible unwillingness to compromise by our country’s leadership. Combine this with the stress and grief of the holidays, and it’s quite obvious that joy has been hard to find these last few months.

\textsuperscript{1} Matthew 2:10.


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So where do the Magi find it?

Friends, the gift of the Magi is that they find joy in the Christ child himself—a child who, although weak and vulnerable, has more power than Herod could ever dream of. The Magi find joy knowing that Jesus’ healing touch, more than any incantation or spell, is what really offers new life. Friends, they find joy knowing that this child will one day stare death in the face and declare, “No more!” The Gift of the Magi is that they give up everything to follow this child—their wealth, their power, two years of their time—and in this sacrifice they find real joy. They know, and they hope that we know, that joy will be found in his love, his forgiveness, and his power over death.

Epiphany means “revealing,” as in God has revealed who God really is in the person and ministry of Jesus. This holy day, at the start of a new year, offers us the chance to open our eyes and see Jesus for who he really is. As we head into a new year, I pray we all have the wisdom to accept the gift of the Magi. Joy will continue to be hard to come by if we think that all the power rests in our hands alone. Joy will be hard to find if we believe that the Herods of this world will have the last word. Joy will be lost if we cry without hope or think that God causes evil instead of goodness. Sisters and Brothers, joy is hard to find if we continue our bickering, pointing our fingers in blame at one another. Instead, joy is found in laughter, a warm embrace, forgiveness, comfort and a shared meal. The Magi found this joy and went home changed.

Friends, receive the gift of the Magi; they are exemplars of devotion, sacrifice, and joy. Seek out the truth that they discovered in Jesus, and like them go home forever changed.

* In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.