

It's January 2, and at the beginning of December, we all thought that the time between Christmas and New Year's would have been a near normal holiday week. But that was not to be.

We have come through this past year and we were looking forward to a time with our family and friends. The Worship Team was saddened, when we had to postpone in-person worship services. It was a hard decision, not an easy one for us. We hope that everyone today on ZOOM understands why that decision was made.

This decision saddened me to such an extent that I was a little late in planning today's service. As I looked at the calendar, I saw two possibilities for this week's service – the 2nd Sunday of Christmas or Epiphany. Theoretically if I used the 2nd Christmas readings, we would not have the opportunity to hear anything about the three (3) gifts, that Matthew records, that were given to Jesus. So, by now you know which scriptures I chose, because of what was read and what we have sung.

Prayer

For some of our pagan ancestors, January 6 was the shortest day of the year, when the sun began to return to the Northern Hemisphere – the winter solstice. This was the time when the last cycle of dormancy before the time of plenty began - the time of gathering, planting, harvesting, storing. In spite of the darkness and cold, it was the promise of the summer to come.

Well before the time of Christ, some civilizations had discovered a way to measure the sun and the stars that resulted in an earlier date for the winter solstice, December 25. Both were wrong according to the ways we now measure such things, but the movement through the shortest day was sacred to the ancients and a deeply spiritual time, regardless of which date was claimed.

Just as our ancestors relied on the regularity of the earth's seasons, we can rely on Epiphany occurring on January 6, which is the 12th day of Christmas referred to in the song we sometimes sing.

It is traditional that on January 6th, Jesus received gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

During the Christmas season, we are used to seeing a manger scene that is crowded with sheep, shepherds, donkeys, cows, camels and “three kings”. The scriptures suggest that the magi found the Christ child after the shepherds – perhaps even as much as 12 or 18 months later. Christians have taken liberties in other aspects of this story. Some have said that there were 3 magi; even though the Gospel of Matthew does not give a number. Since 3 gifts are

described, perhaps some have settled on that number of visitors. Ancient Christian art of this event portrays 2, 4, or as many as 12 magi.

Along the way, these magi have acquired names: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar are their designated names in the western tradition. In the eastern tradition they have been known as Hormizdah (hor-miz-dah), king of Persia; Yazdegerd (yaz-de-gerd), king of Saba; and Perozadh (pero -zad), king of Sheba. And this matter of being kings – somewhere along the way they were elevated to the status of royalty, perhaps due to the words of Psalm 72: “May the kings of Sheba and Saba bring gifts; may all kings fall down before him” (v 10-11).

To examine the magi is to see people who went a long way to see the Christ child. The magi were just like the shepherds, they both went looking for the Christ child. The shepherds only had to travel a short distance while the magi traversed 12 or 13 hundred miles (1900 to 2100 km) from Persia to Bethlehem. The shepherds heard about the Christ child. The magi saw a star. The shepherds and magi both accepted these facts on faith and went seeking the child. All of the characters in the story received the news of the birth as both a gift and a quest. Some accepted while others, like Herod, refused to receive the gift or to make the journey.

The birth of Christ, was God’s doing, first and last, and it is offered to all of us, near and far, as a gift. We need to remember that the ultimate reason that Matthew puts the magi in the story is to let the events of Bethlehem encompass the world. Gentiles were included. Pagans were welcomed. People who had no prior association with the long history of God’s interaction with a people chosen through Abraham and Sarah, were brought into the story. The story of the magi reminds us that the birth of Christ is indeed a gift, for every person in the world.

Nonetheless, the long trek of the magi also suggests, that the birth is not a gift that can be put on a shelf and admired. It is a gift that calls for a response from us. There are many ways to envision all of this, but let’s consider for a moment one hymn we sing regularly during the season of Advent; *Hope is a Star*, and the first word in each verse: hope, peace, joy, and love. We sing of these gifts, gifts that are to call forth something from us.

Hope is not passive, something to sit back and think about – I hope that this or that will come to pass. Hope in the biblical sense suggests a state of readiness. If I hope to get a new barbeque grill, shouldn’t I be gathering recipes on how cooking on a barbeque grill is a little different? Hope is not neutral – it involves expectation.

And **peace** – it demands our passion. Peace cannot be confined to the realm of our national life. Peace is a matter of lifestyle. Peace is a way of living in our families, neighbourhoods, workplaces, and communities.

The gift of **joy** requires that it be unleashed – allowed to infect others. Joy is a gift that diminishes itself when not celebrated and released.

And finally, there is the gift of **love**. Of all the gifts celebrated in this past season. Yes, the gift of love reveals that we are loved, but it also ought to be plain that it means we are called to love in response.

In this season of Epiphany, we celebrate the story of the magi who traveled long and far to enter the presence of the Christ child. It is a liminal time, a transitional time, in which we as a church move from birth to ministry. Let us consider today what we will do with the gifts God has given in the birth of the Christ. Epiphany is the time to get up and to go – to put these good gifts to use and purpose.