

# Epiphany

On this day the church celebrates Epiphany, a name that comes from a Greek word meaning “to make manifest” or “to display.” On this day and during this Season after the Epiphany, Christians rejoice in the gift of saving love and the unfolding vision of wholeness that God has made manifest for all people in Jesus the Christ. Our call is to participate in proclaiming this good news.

## Focus Scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

The “wise men” or “magi” mentioned in verse 1 appear only in the gospel of Matthew. *Magi* refers to a priestly group in ancient Persia and Babylon, whose work combined elements of astrology, astronomy, and dream interpretation. Despite the song “We Three Kings,” “wise ones” is a more accurate synonym for magi than “kings.” In addition, the text does not say how many magi there were. Perhaps the description of the three gifts in verse 11 inspired the notion of three magi.

Matthew seems to make it clear that the magi were Gentiles – people who are not Jewish. Some scholars speculate that the magi may have connected the star described in verses 2, 7, 9, and 10 with the birth of a Jewish king because of their contact with Jews who remained in Babylon after the end of exile in the sixth century BCE. It is significant that these Gentiles are seeking the promised Messiah.

Why does Herod react with fear to the news of this baby’s birth? Herod the Great was a powerful ruler known for his ruthlessness and paranoia, and he likely perceived this suggestion of a new king as a threat.

The gifts described in verse 11 befit a royal ruler. Gold is mentioned often in the Bible as a metal of great value used for worship vessels, as well as for personal adornment. Frankincense and myrrh are fragrant plant products. In Bible times, they were valued as ingredients for incense to be burned in worship, as well as for perfumes.

The magi are told in a dream to return to Jerusalem. So, in defiance of Herod’s order to report Jesus’ whereabouts, they go home by another road. The magi’s choice to participate in God’s unfolding plan affords protection to Jesus.

This account in Matthew further grounds the events of Jesus’ life in Hebrew Scriptures.

Herod’s threat echoes the story of Pharaoh and the child Moses (Exodus 2:1–10). In both cases, a child is saved from a tyrant’s intent to kill that tragically victimizes other innocents. In both cases, the child grows up to lead God’s people. Verse 6 quotes Micah 5:2 to speak of Jesus as the promised one of God. Verse 12 recalls several stories in the Hebrew Scriptures that link dreams and deliverance (for example, Joseph in Genesis 41).

As the magi followed a bright star to Jesus, the prophet in **Isaiah 60:1–6** declares that “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” “Your” is likely a reference to Jerusalem as it would be after the end of the exile in 536 BCE. The Hebrew word translated as “nations” here is the same as “Gentiles.”

In **Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14**, the psalmist prays for a wise ruler who will keep God’s promises on behalf of those who are usually “left out” – those who are poor, needy, and oppressed.

The “mystery of Christ” is addressed in **Ephesians 3:1–12**. Paul proclaims that Gentiles are also full members of the Body of Christ. The church in Ephesus is called to make known the vision of God’s wisdom, grounding their action in bold faith in Christ.



Epiphany is more than a celebration of the magi’s visit to the young Jesus. The star beckons each of us to embrace the gift of Christ. Participating in the vision of God’s ways may call us to change directions; the promise of Epiphany is God’s leading. What are the joys and risks of accepting the call to live into God’s unfolding vision of wholeness? In what ways, and in what individuals, might God be revealing Christ in your midst today?



January 2, 2011

**Focus Scripture**  
**Matthew 2:1–12**

**Additional Scriptures**  
**Isaiah 60:1–6**  
**Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14**  
**Ephesians 3:1–12**

**We praise you, Holy One, for visions of your loving ways. Stir our hope and fill us with courage to imagine how we might journey in the paths you illuminate with the brilliance of the Christ child. Amen.**

If you have Internet access, visit [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com) to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.

This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately an hour to explore the story of the magi.

## The Focus for All Ages

The story of the magi searching for the new ruler of the Jews is one of the key stories of the Christian community, a story that is told and celebrated every year. Such stories are not only timeless, but they are for everyone, from the youngest child to the eldest adult. And these stories are ones we can hear and enjoy together over and over. When we come together across the age groups to learn and explore our faith stories, each person can be a role model for others. When we come together like this, we find that we learn from the youngest in the group as well as the eldest.

This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately an hour to explore the story of the magi. A team other than the regular age-specific leaders might plan and lead this special session. During this time of the year, church gatherings have a smaller attendance as people travel during the Christmas and New Year holiday. Take advantage of that smaller group to help the generations get to know one another better through this event.

No matter how carefully you plan, some adults find it impossible to imagine learning with children and some children become shy when approached by an adult who is not a family member. Some teens and young adults may be reluctant to be separated from their peers. Or, for reasons of space or numbers, you may choose to meet in age-specific groups for this session or for the Respond activities. Therefore, the zones in Respond offer ways to adapt the activities to make them more challenging for a group of teens or simpler for children only. Then too, older adults sometimes find that the noise created by a group of all ages makes it difficult for them to hear. They may prefer to be in a quieter spot where they can discuss the story and its ramifications. Think about the people that you hope will attend and try to meet as many of their needs as possible.

Pray that everyone, whatever the age, finds new meaning and joy in this story of the recognition and worship of the Christ child.

January 2, 2011



### Materials needed

#### Before the session

- ❑ Prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 2:1–12 and biblical background material (p. 33). What message do you take from this story?
- ❑ Bring, if possible, *Seasons Music CD, vol. 9* and *CD player*. *Seasons .mp3 Downloads* are available for purchase from [www.spiritseasons.com](http://www.spiritseasons.com).
- ❑ Bring songs "I Am Becoming Peace" and "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" (pp. 4 and 5 in *Music Section*); also #6 and #1 on *Seasons Music CD*).

#### Gather

- ❑ Prepare worship table with *white or gold cloth, Christ candle, matches, Bible, and offering basket*. Set up a crèche with the figures of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus on the worship table.
- ❑ Bring poster "Starry Night over the Rhone" or photograph of the night sky filled with stars.

#### Engage

- ❑ Prepare to tell story on *today's resource sheet "A New Star in the Sky."*

- ❑ Bring *nativity set*, figures as large as you can find. Consider having more than three magi figures.
- ❑ Cut a large star from *cardboard* and cover with *glitter*.

#### Respond

- ❑ **Art zone:** *Chalk, glitter glue, dark blue or black construction paper, poster "Starry Night over the Rhone" or photograph of night sky filled with stars, and star pattern on today's resource sheet "My Gift"*
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet "My Gift," pencils or coloured markers, scissors, hole punch, yarn*
- ❑ **Conversation zone:** *copies of today's resource sheet "The Magi and Their Gifts"*
- ❑ **Music zone:** *song "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" (p. 5 in Music Section; also #1 on Seasons Music CD), (optional) rhythm instruments, and hymn books with Epiphany hymns*
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** *nylon netting squares, pot-pourri, rubber bands, ribbon, and spoons*

#### Bless

- ❑ Bring *votive candles*, one for each person



# Epiphany

## Scripture

Matthew 2:1–12

**FOCUS** To hear and celebrate the story of the visit of the magi.

## 1 GATHER

### Opening ritual

**Call to learning** When everyone is settled and focused on the worship table, light the Christ candle. Point to the nativity figures on the worship table and recall with the group that we have just celebrated Christmas. But now the angels and the shepherds are gone, leaving Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in the scene. If you are not holding this event on Epiphany Day (January 6), say when it is and note that Epiphany Day concludes the Twelve Days of Christmas. On that day and for this time together, you are gathered to celebrate Epiphany Day, the day when the church recalls the visit of the magi to Bethlehem. The word Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning “to display” or “appearance.” Have the group say this response several times: *Epiphany is a light in our lives.* Then lead them in the opening litany:

O God,  
when the Christmas trees and decorations  
are looking tired, *Response*  
When the rest of the world thinks Christ-  
mas is over, *Response*  
We light our candle and remember the star  
the magi followed. *Response*

Sing the song “I Am Becoming Peace” (p. 4 in *Music Section*; also #6 on *Seasons Music CD*). Receive any offering during this song.

**Pray** this prayer, or one of your own:

God of love,  
we gather as we continue to celebrate the  
birth of Jesus.  
May our hearts be open to your word to us,  
as we explore the story of the magi’s visit.  
Amen.

**Extinguish** the candle as a sign that the opening ritual is over.

### Connecting with the focus

**Starry skies** The star is a central feature of the story of the magi and one thing that all ages will recognize. Wherever you live, looking at the sky on a clear night is dramatic. Draw out this wonder as the group talks about seeing the stars in the sky. Ask:

■ **When you are outside at night and see all the stars in the sky, how do you feel?**

After several answers, show them the poster *Starry Night over the Rhone* or a photograph of the night sky filled with stars. Ask:

■ **Looking at this picture, how do you think the sky filled with stars made the artist or photographer feel?**

Conclude with noting that the story today is not about lots of stars, but one special star.

## 2 ENGAGE

### Preparing for the story

**Birth of Jesus** Distribute figures from a nativity set (Mary, Joseph, Jesus, animals, shepherds, angel). Have the persons with the figures set them on the table, creating the traditional crèche scene, as the story is told.

From the gospel of Luke:

– Gabriel told Mary the surprising news that she was going to have a baby and she sang a song of joy. (*Mary is brought forward.*)

From the gospel of Matthew

– Joseph learned of the coming birth from an angel in a dream. (*Joseph is brought forward.*)

Back to Luke:

– Mary and Joseph journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted for the census. (*Mary and Joseph walk around and are finally placed at the crèche.*)

– While there, the baby Jesus was born in a stable, where the animals were kept. (*The baby Jesus and the animals are placed in the crèche.*)

- Angels announced the birth to shepherds, who came to see the baby. (*Hold angel over the crèche. Bring shepherds to the crèche for a moment and then take them away.*)

### The Bible story

**Visitors from far away** Introduce the story of the magi by noting that not only did shepherds leave their fields around Bethlehem to come to Bethlehem, but people from far away also came to see the child Jesus. Their story is in the gospel of Matthew. Give one person the large star (see Prepare) and distribute the figures of the magi. Tell the story on today's resource sheet "A New Star in the Sky," based on **Matthew 2:1–12**. Have the people carry the figures as they follow the person with the star who walks slowly around the space. Have them place the figures of the magi in the crèche when that part of the story is told. Those who carried the magi figures stand to the side until the end of the story. Then they take the magi figures away, to indicate that

they returned to their homes.

Have each child find an adult or teenager to form a pair. If there are more adults than children or vice versa, suggest that the additional people join one of the pairs. Give them these questions to discuss:

- **Why was Herod so worried about this little child?**
- **Why were the magi so excited to find the child Jesus?**
- **What do you think appeared or was revealed in this discovery of the magi?**

### The Bible story and us

When all the pairs have had time to discuss the questions, bring them together. Invite some to tell their answers to the last question above. Recall that the magi brought gifts of gold and expensive perfume to Jesus. In the Respond zones, everyone will have ways to think about what gifts they can give to Jesus today.

# 3

RESPOND

Explain the choices in the zones. Invite everyone to select a zone and work with the materials there.

- **Art zone: Star of Epiphany** The star is the dominant symbol of the Epiphany story. This activity will attract anyone with an artistic bent. Display the poster *Starry Night over the Rhone* or the photograph of the night sky as inspiration to create starry pictures. Provide art supplies, such as chalk or glitter glue to use on dark blue or black construction paper. First, invite the participants in this activity to sit quietly and gaze on the poster or photograph, thinking about the journey the magi made to find Jesus. When they are ready, they can create their idea of what following the star was like. Combine their drawings with the large star from Engage to create a display for the congregation to see.

*An adaptation to include creative writing:* Use the star pattern on today's resource sheet "My Gift" to cut stars from plain paper. Provide thin-tip coloured markers for the participants to write their thoughts about following the star on the paper stars.

- **Quiet zone: Gifts for Jesus** The gifts brought by the magi prompt us to consider what we might give to Jesus. This activity can be self-directed or guided by a leader. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "My Gift" and pencils or coloured markers. Have participants follow the instructions on the resource sheet. Decorate the star and cut it out. Punch a hole at the top of the star, thread yarn through the hole and make a loop hanger. They can hang them at home as reminders of the journey of the magi and the church's celebration of Epiphany Day.

*To use this activity with a group of children,* talk with them about the things they can give to Jesus. Then help them write their choices on the stars. Continue as above.

*To use this activity with a group of adults,* provide more questions for reflection, such as: What gifts do we offer Jesus? How might we bring God's love and justice to others? Conclude with each person writing a response on a star, selecting what they will do in the coming week to show God's love and justice to others.

❑ **Conversation zone: The magi and their gifts**

This activity encourages a deeper look at the story of the magi and its meaning for today. Provide copies of today's resource sheet "The Magi and Their Gifts" and Bibles. Form groups of three or four to read and discuss the questions on the resource sheet.

*To use this activity with a group of older children, lead them in the discussion about the magi. Then have them imagine going with the magi. Ask:*

■ **What gifts would you bring to Jesus?**

See the quiet zone for a way to complete this activity.

*To use this activity with a group of teenagers or adults, have a leader guide the discussion with the information and questions on the resource sheet.*

- ❑ **Music zone: Praises to God** The magi journeyed to Bethlehem to honour or praise the one whose star they saw in the sky. We continue to offer our praises to Jesus and God. These praises often take the form of song. The song "Cosmic Hymn of Praise" (p. 5 in *Music Section*; also #1 on *Seasons Music CD*) calls forth praise from all creation. First, teach the part of the song that includes the phrases, "Praise God" and "Let all creation sing." Encourage everyone to join in on those parts as more of the song is sung or listened to on the *Seasons Music CD*.

*To use this activity with a group of children, teach them the portion of the song as noted above. Distribute rhythm instruments for them to play as they sing their parts.*

*Additional activity* If the church choir has this Sunday off, perhaps the all-age group could provide this song as the anthem for the service of worship.

*Epiphany songs* Ask worship planners for the Epiphany hymns that will be included in worship. Add them to the music zone so the people will be prepared to sing them if worship follows, or so they will learn more about them if worship preceded the education time.

- ❑ **Outreach zone: Sachets** One gift the magi brought to Jesus was perfume. The participants will make sachets as reminders of God's love and the church's care to give to people residing in adult residences or church members who are unable to leave their homes. Place a spoonful of potpourri on a square of nylon netting. Gather up the sides and close tightly with a rubber band. Tie a colourful ribbon around the rubber band. Prepare gift cards to go with the sachets.

To use this activity with children, assist them in putting the rubber band around the top. Print gift cards in advance for the children to decorate.



**Gather** When it is almost time to conclude the session, ask the participants to finish their activities and come to the worship table. Light the Christ candle.

**Light of Christ** Give each participant a votive candle to light and hold during the litany prayer.

**Pray** this litany. Explain that the group is to follow each line of the prayer with "We travel with the light of Christ."

God of all creation,  
we praise Jesus as the magi did,

and now (*Response*).

At your direction,  
the magi went home by another road,  
and on our road, (*Response*).

This Epiphany Day will soon end,  
but (*Response*). Amen.

At the end of the prayer, for safety's sake, have the participants blow out their votive candles.

**Blessing** Invite the participants to say this blessing to people next to them:

Follow the Epiphany star, the light of Christ,  
this week. God is with you.



When did you observe the participants discovering something new about the story of the magi?

When did the different age groups interact in a conversation or activity?

How would you describe this special session in three to five words?

What would you change for a future all-ages event?



# A New Star in the Sky

based on Matthew 2:1-12

Rehearse this story so you can  
tell it with the wonder  
and awe that it  
inspires.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a special star appeared in the sky. But the star didn't shine only in Bethlehem or even in the countryside around it. The star shone in lands far away. In some of those lands to the east, people who studied the night sky and watched the stars saw it. These magi looked at this new star with wonder. What did a new star mean? They were sure it was a special star, a star with a message. The message was that a new ruler was born for the Jewish people.

Some magi from these faraway lands, especially interested in this new star, decided to look for this new ruler. "The star will lead the way," they said.

Getting ready for a long trip, and one where you didn't know exactly where you were going, took some time. Camels had to be packed with bedding, food, clothing, pans, and everything necessary for such a long trip. People had to be hired to take care of the camels, to cook the food, and all the other jobs necessary from day to day.

Finally, on one beautiful day, everything was ready. But the magi could not leave when the sun was shining. They waited until night so the star could show the way. With only the moonlight and the light of this new star, they moved slowly across the land.

When they reached Jerusalem, they stopped to see King Herod. It was only polite to call upon the king when you entered a new land. And King Herod was known as a harsh king so the magi did not want to anger him in any way. So off they went to the king.

Of course, King Herod wanted to know why they had come to his land. The magi answered, "We have seen a new star in the sky. We believe this star means that a child has been born who is king of the Jews. We want to worship this child. Can you tell us where we might find this baby?"

Everyone present gasped. King Herod was king of the Jews. Indeed, this news worried the king a lot. However, King Herod was sly and didn't let the magi know how upset he was. He stepped away and called together the chief priests of the Jews. "Where is this Messiah, the ruler for whom you are waiting, to be born?"

This was not a hard question for the chief priests. "The prophets have told us that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem of Judea," they said.

When King Herod returned to the magi, he smiled and asked, "Now when did you first see this star?"

After the magi told him, King Herod said, "Go to Bethlehem. When you find the child who is to be king of the Jews, let me know. I want to worship the child too."

The magi left King Herod, pleased that they knew where to go and that the king was friendly to them. And they were almost at the end of their journey.

The star continued to lead them until they came to a house in the village of Bethlehem. To be truthful, it didn't look like much of a place for a king. But the magi were excited to find Mary and the child Jesus inside. They quickly unpacked the gifts they had brought. They gave Jesus gold, along with frankincense and myrrh, which were sweet-smelling expensive perfumes.

Then they left Bethlehem, thinking that they would return to Jerusalem to see King Herod on their way home. But that night, as they slept, they dreamed. In their dreams, God warned them not to tell King Herod about the child Jesus. So they went home by a different road.



# My Gift

The magi brought very special gifts to celebrate the birth of Jesus. They chose expensive gifts because they wanted to give the very best that they could. Gifts don't have to be expensive to be special. What is the best gift that you could give Jesus?

## *Perhaps you could*

- ★ say something encouraging to someone
- ★ play with a younger brother or sister
- ★ care for the earth by taking bottles to the recycling depot

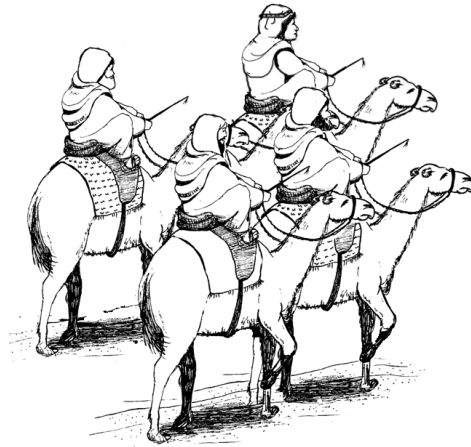
**My gift to Jesus.**



# The Magi and Their Gifts

Turn to Matthew 2:1–12 in the Bible. The story of the magi is found only here. Let's dig deeper into this story to find why it is in Matthew's gospel.

**magi** (plural) people who studied the stars and the night skies  
When speaking of one person, say **magus**



How many magi or wise ones followed the star? Are you sure? Check your answer in Matthew 2:1–12.

Why do you think we use three in illustrations and songs about the magi?

The magi were not Jews. How do you think they knew about the star for a new king of the Jews?

What did they want to know from King Herod?

Who did Herod ask so he could answer their question?

Let's think more about the magi. Since they were not Jews, why do you think they wanted to show respect or worship the new king of the Jews?

God gave the magi an important message in a dream. What was it? Why was it important?

## DIGGING DEEPER FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND ADULTS

The magi brought gold, certainly a gift for a ruler of the nation. They also brought frankincense and myrrh, which were perfumes used by royalty. Myrrh was also one of the ingredients used to prepare bodies for burial.

Knowing the story of Jesus' whole life, what might these gifts from the magi symbolize?

What gifts might we bring to Jesus today?

King Herod was a strong ruler. Even so, he feared that someone was trying to overthrow him. Being fair to the people he ruled was not important to him. Justice was not shown to the people. For the Jews, the promise of a new ruler brought hope for peace and justice.

What is your hope for peace and justice today?

What can you do to promote peace and justice for the world?