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**Title:** Going Home Different

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**Scripture:** [Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

**Text:** [Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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We are ahead of the story, but just by one day. Tomorrow is the day when people around the world celebrate the arrival of the wise men. They finally arrive in Bethlehem bearing gifts for baby Jesus. I know for many of you, Christmas is back in the box, stored wherever you store your decorations. It never ceases to amaze me how quickly the commercial retailers switch from Christmas decorations to Valentine's candy and cards. It takes three months to get us to buy, decorate and celebrate Christmas. But almost overnight it's gone.

Some Christians don't box away Christmas until Tuesday, the day after Epiphany. I'll admit that on occasion, I have Epiphany envy. Around the world, big Epiphany celebrations, particularly in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities. There are parades of decorative floats and people in costume as the kings bearing gifts. They feature light and music shows, fireworks and clowns and jugglers who throw candy to the crowds.

And there are lots of places that have polar bear plunges. After the Epiphany parade in Prague, Czechs jump off the medieval Charles Bridge, into the 37 degrees Vltava River. Bulgarians dance in the even colder Tunja river. It's called the ice ring dance and then, they search for a cross thrown in the river. Athenians have a similar tradition but in a warmer Mediterranean. Google each of these Epiphany plunges and you'll find plenty of images. But despite the different cultures, you will see wet people, looking radiant as if their hearts are heart throbbing and swelling with joy.<sup>1</sup>

That's what the prophet Isaiah said would happen to those wise enough to get to Bethlehem. And it is clear what the wise men got when they finally made it to Bethlehem. Isaiah predicts that they will bring gold and incense. Somehow he missed, in his prophetic vision, myrrh. But he believes that these kings along with everyone who visits Bethlehem, "will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy." (Isaiah 60: 5a).

It's the one thing that we know that must have happened to the wise men. They were filled with joy and their lives were changed because of their journey to Bethlehem. Because they responded to the revelation, they became themselves, a new revelation. They make it into the gospel of

Matthew because of their quest to find the child born King of the Jews. But we remember them in ways far greater than what we know from Matthew.

For instance, we sing of three kings even though none of the translations gives us a number or describes them as kings. Wise men or magi are the preferred translations, three because there are three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But some of the earliest paintings in Christian catacombs have two or four. Like Mary and Joseph, the wise men have their own gospels that didn't make it into the Bible. The earliest was recently found in the Vatican library. It is *The Revelation of the Magi*. It has a list of twelve Magi with names. Other Christian writings imagine an entire army of Magi!

Early Christians didn't agree about where they are from. Lots of scholars talk about the wise men arriving from Persia, modern-day Iran or Babylon or Arabia, which fits with Isaiah's prophecy, "all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense" (Isaiah 60:6a). In *The Revelation of the Magi*, they come from a land called Shir, located at the eastern edge of the inhabited world, probably equivalent to China.

There are debates about when they arrived. Two years is a popular timeframe because Herod "...sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men." (Matthew 2:16b). Others hold that they arrived 12 days from the birth of Jesus, the day of Epiphany. *The Revelation of the Magi* says they arrived instantly because the star "carries" the Magi to Bethlehem in the blink of an eye. That sounds a lot like Star Trek.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the tradition and whoever they were, their visit captures the imagination of the early Christians. Their story is told and retold, written in lots of different ways. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century, relics said to be their bones show up in Constantinople as Christianity becomes a world religion. Constantine's mother, Helena, found them in Jerusalem and brought them home with her. For a while, they were housed in Milan. Then, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Emperor Barbarossa brought them to Cologne. Today, you'll find them in a Shrine of Three Kings which sits high about the chancel in the Cathedral of Cologne. If you go there you can even read a biography about a reunion they had in Armenia in 54 AD. After the reunion, all three died, one on January 1, another on the 6 and a third on January 11.<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, there is a big Epiphany celebration there where kids go door to door dressed as Stars Singers, looking radiant, welling with joy when given cookies and candy.

Why are the wise men so important to us, particularly when we are nearly two weeks out from Christmas? I hope it connects with you in two places.

The first one is this. They were outsiders, invited to worship the king. They came from some far off place in the East, hungry to find the king of the Jews. They weren't Jews themselves but "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 worshipped him." (Matthew 2: 10-11)

This is an important truth of the gospel. God didn't send Jesus to save a few; Jesus came to embrace humanity. Matthew wants us to know this and it is why his gospel is the one that shares this story. Matthew is the most Jewish of the four gospels. He writes about the prophets, the Law, the rituals of the Temple. But at the very beginning of his story of Jesus, Gentiles are kneeling at the manger. He starts his gospel with an image of inclusivity to drive home the universal truth of God's love. Jesus comes to save all of us.

This was a struggle of the early church, to break out of a narrow understanding about who is in and who is out. The first Christians were Jews and were happy to remain a subset of Judaism. They had a tough time breaking away from assumptions about people, particularly people who didn't look like them, sound like them, or act like them. They had such a strong identity as God's people that they didn't readily embrace Gentiles even though those very Gentiles had their hearts warmed and their lives changed by Jesus.

The Book of Acts records these struggles and they were, as they always are, painful. Finally, Peter, who had has a hard time working through this issue as any, eventually has a vision. He preaches about it in the 11th chapter saying, "Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?" (Acts 11:16-17) The 'them' are the Gentiles, the non-Jews, those who like the magi come from outside of the tradition. In other words, us. The gift that God has given Jesus God now freely gives to all, even to us Gentiles. God is not partial even if we are.<sup>4</sup>

We have a variation of these same issues, the one which the wise men address when they go to Bethlehem. Who is invited to worship Jesus? Who can bow down? Who can enter the house? Just like the first Christians struggling with who was in and who they wanted out, we too make our lists, lists of people we think belong and people who aren't good enough. Sometimes they are based upon belief, other times on lifestyle, orientation, nationality, even looks. We sing peace on earth good to men but we want to make sure that those men and women look like us, believe like us, and act like us. Building walls isn't what Jesus came for. Jesus comes to break

down those boundaries and invite all into fellowship. Given the love and grace that God demonstrated toward us, it seems like hospitality, kindness, and acceptance of everyone is the way we honor Jesus.

That's the first truth of the wise men's visit and the second is this. Something happens to the magi once they kneel at the manger, something transforming and they go home different. We all know that they were "...warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (Matthew 2: 12) That's a geographical statement. Like Mapquest or your GPS guidance system, there was another road. But it is clearly describing something more than a physical route; it's also pointing out something about their spirits.

In Bethlehem they are changed; they are different and the stories and artwork, the shrines and festivals give testimony to this truth. They followed a star to Bethlehem and left Bethlehem to become stars, to shine the light of the world into the world. Their lives were changed and they went home different, overwhelmed with joy, radiant.

How were they different? They were different because of who they saw Jesus to be. You can see it with the gifts that they offered. First, they presented gold. Gold was a gift given to kings, a much rarer commodity than it is today. When the wise men bring gold to Jesus, they are saying, "Jesus, you are the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

But they also give him frankincense. Frankincense was a type of incense and was the very type of incense used by the priests. It was a sweet fragrance to God. With this second gift to Jesus, it is clear that they see him not just as a king but also a priest. In Jesus' culture, the priests served as the mediator. They stood between the community and God. Today, Jesus is the Great High Priest, the mediator between you and God.

As Isaiah promised, they brought gold and incense proclaiming the Lord. But they also brought myrrh? Why myrrh? Why else than it is an embalming spice. When somebody died, their bodies in that culture were embalmed with myrrh. They anticipated his future. Not only is Jesus a King, not only is he a priest, but he is also the Savior.

The wise men saw all of this, received this Epiphany. They were there, not just to pay only pay homage, but their gifts, reveal who Jesus is. It is why their story spread so quickly, why it was so treasured. The world changed because they were changed. They experienced an epiphany and as a result, they became an epiphany.

Are you different because you've been to Bethlehem? A trip to Bethlehem is a terrible thing to waste. Remember Isaiah's prophecy? Everyone who visits Bethlehem, "...will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy." (Isaiah 60: 5a) Does it? In Bethlehem, we see God, not high and lifted up, but lowly, vulnerable, lying in a manger. We see with our own eyes the power of love to conquer hate and violence. We see a baby who will change the world. So we leave, changed and the world will change because we are different.

Even these many years removed from Bethlehem, we can make that difference. We can't mount camels and ride days with eyes fixed on a Star. But our visit can be no less meaningful if we open ourselves to the power of Epiphany. Epiphany means the manifestation of Christ. If the birth of Jesus reveals anything to us, it ought to make us different, change the way we go. We should be radiant and our hearts throbbing and swelling with joy. And then, like ancient magi, we begin to change the lives of those around us.

You could do that, can't you? Reveal this truth, make it manifest, be an epiphany to someone? Maybe invite someone to worship or offer support to one who is grieving. Feed someone who is hungry. Be more generous in your support. Can you do something? I hope, so. I hope Bethlehem made a difference and you went home differently and because you are different, you make in the new year. If so, you'll not just witness Epiphany; you'll be an Epiphany.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/06/world/epiphany-christmas.html>

<sup>2</sup> Brent Landau, The Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem, excerpts at <http://www.patheos.com/Book-Club/Brent-Landau-Revelation-of-the-Magi.html>. Retrieved, 1-2-12.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tonyburke.ca/wp-content/uploads/Landau-Revelation-of-the-Magi.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Gomes, Peter J.; Gates, Henry L. (2009-03-17). Sermons: Biblical Wisdom For Daily Living (pp. 35-36). Harper Collins, Inc. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Gomes, p. 36.