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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC  
Epiphany Sunday  
January 6, 2008

Isaiah 60.1-6  
**Matthew 1.1-12**

### **The Meaning of the Magi**

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” --Matthew 2.2

I remember going to church in early January when I was in college and wondering what was going on. After all, Christmas was over; why were we still singing Christmas carols in church? I found it all very puzzling. Certainly outside of church, Christmas was over. A clear sign of that was the taking down of our Christmas tree. My parents always took it down on New Year’s Day. By then its needles were drying out and dropping rapidly—a real fire hazard. And soon I’d be back at school again, and I would no longer be around to help put away Christmas decorations. Certainly by January 6th, Christmas was long over. Why, then, were we singing Christmas carols and hearing about the wise men?

It isn’t that the Church is out of step with the world. Rather, the world is out of step with the Church—remember, it was our holiday first! The world tends to pack the entire Christmas story into one fast-paced event: Mary & Joseph rush to Bethlehem, Jesus is born; the shepherds come; the wise men arrive bearing gifts; and then we all go home and tear into our presents. And Christmas is over before you know it. In contrast, the Church takes a slower pace. We celebrate Christmas for a couple of weeks (12 days, to be exact), and then move into the season of Epiphany for several more.

What is Epiphany? Epiphany means manifestation”—something that is revealed or shown. The usual image for Epiphany is light—for you need light in order to see anything, or for anything to be revealed. The image of light is a good one for this time of year, when it gets dark out so early and we’re surrounded by a lot of brown and dull green vegetation. In some

far-northern climates, the darkness of winter is often associated with skyrocketing rates of depression and alcoholism. We need light to see where our lives are going, especially at this time of the year.

One of the first lights we hear about in our scripture readings is the star of Bethlehem. After Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the wise men see his star and are guided by it to where Jesus is. Who are these wise men? We don't really know much about them. Matthew tells us that they are "from the East" (2:1), which could mean Arabia, Mesopotamia, or elsewhere. Popular traditions have portrayed the wise men as being 3 in number, although Matthew does not say so. We assume three wise men because they bring 3 gifts—but maybe 5 of them chipped in together? Sometimes we call them Magi, which is an ancient person who is kind of a strange combination of scholar, astronomer, and aristocrat. Other times we call them kings because of certain passages in the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah says: "And nations shall come to your light, and kings... They shall bring gold and frankincense" (60:3,6). Psalm 72 also proclaims: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him..." (72:10-11).

The Magi were surely Gentiles—not Jews—because they do not know the scriptural prophecy concerning the location of the Messiah's birth. They arrived in Jerusalem saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" If they had been Jewish, they would have read the book of Micah which lays it out clearly: "O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,...from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel." (5:2).

The wise men cleared the way for the rest of us. As Gentiles, the Magi stand for all of us who come to Christ from outside the chosen people of Israel. They remind us that God chose to make Jesus manifest to the whole world. They are reminders of Epiphany.

We do well not to forget the difficulty of their journey. Some families have crèches--manger scenes--which they set out every Christmas. And some always set the three kings and their camels some distance away from the manger scene, and every day move them a bit closer to the stable. They always arrive at the beginning of Epiphany. Perhaps we all need to be

reminded to keep moving toward the light of Christ. Though the journey may be difficult, we must go worship Christ. T.S.Eliot describes the journey of the magi in a wonderful poem:

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter...  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly...

Because we've given priority to the term "kings," we tend to forget that these Magi worked hard to get to see Jesus. These were not stately porcelain figures gliding across the living room. These were real, flesh and blood human beings, huffing and puffing and shivering all the way of their journey during an era when travel was difficult. Their gifts represented a genuine sacrifice.

Our experience at the Lord's table this morning can be greatly enriched if we remember the meaning of the Magi. Like the magi, we too come bearing gifts. The magi brought Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but with these things they brought a gift even more precious—themselves, and their long journey. We bring forward this morning not only our offerings of money, but also offerings of our lives. For some of us the journey to this table has been long and hard, and all of us are here to offer our lives up to Jesus in an act of worship, and in a

promise to extend this worship into the next six days of the week, then next four weeks of this month. Like the magi, we come to give.

But, more importantly, like the magi, we come to *receive*. Our journey to the Lord's Table means nothing if the table isn't spread to receive us. Through the gifts of the table, Christ makes himself known to us in the breaking of bread. The magi did not travel so many miles to come and negotiate a treaty with the newborn king; they came to worship him, and to receive a blessing. Our labors and our efforts may bring us to this table, but when we open our mouths to receive the elements, nothing else matters but the Giver.

We come to the Lord's table seeking enlightenment and epiphany. Somehow or other, we have each glimpsed the light—otherwise we wouldn't be here this morning. Our calling now is to imitate the response of the magi who saw the same light centuries ago:

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” --Matthew

2.2