God is in the Detours- Epiphany 2025

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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Today we celebrate the Epiphany-arrival of the Magi. But who were these ancient visitors in the Gospel of Matthew? Magi were astrologists or astronomists. They were people, probably men, who looked to the sky for guidance. They believed that specific ways that the stars and constellations aligned predicted events and determined the course of one’s life. They were common in the ancient world.

The celebration of these visitors-of the Epiphany goes back to ancient times. As early as 400 ad there is artwork and manuscripts about the visitors. A church in Palestine has frescoes from 400 ad. depicting them as Persians probably because Babylon was the center of astronomy in the ancient world. There are manuscripts from around the same time with their names and the ages that they died. There was Melchior with light skin, Casper with olive skin, and Balthazar with dark skin. These names stuck. They are so widely used that the spellchecker in Word corrected them!

Later Medieval and Renaissance art depicted them with characteristics that influenced how people saw them. Melchior was from Persia, Caspar from India, and Balthazar from Arabia. Their names are different in Syrian Christianity, Ethiopian Christianity, and with Armenians.

The Bible speaks of the magi in two places. We have the prophecy found in Isaiah saying that nations shall recognize him as light of the world and will celebrate bringing gifts. This passage in Isaiah could be speaking about Israel as a group of people. As Christians, we read it as a prophecy about Jesus and the Magi.

Then we have today’s gospel reading from Matthew. It says, “Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem”. It goes on to say how they could read the stars because they followed it, and they paid homage to the child with gold, frankincense and myrrh. Tradition tells us that they were converted as followers of Jesus. While we don’t know for sure their names or how many originally visited the Holy Family, we know that a group of travelers from the east visited the Holy Family.

Epiphany marks the end of our Christmas season. In some cultures, especially Latino cultures, Epiphany is celebrated with parades, skits about the 3 kings, king cakes, and of course lots of fiestas. For many Latinos, Epiphany symbolizes the gathering of races. It is believed that each king came from a different continent.

Whoever the Magi were and wherever they came from, Matthew’s gospel includes them for the example that they give us. The Magi experienced God’s revelation in the star. It showed them where to go. They experienced God in the baby Jesus. They experienced God telling them in a dream to go home another way. God interrupted their lives and had them change directions. I wonder what the Magi thought they would find. The signs leading them to Jesus were unusual. Did they expect to find a powerful God or to learn how to harness the power of the star?

We don’t know what they expected but we know that their encounter with God through the star, through Jesus, and through the dream caused them to change their plans. Encounters with God frequently cause us to make detours in our lives. The detours provide new insights and growth. Detours are frequently God’s answers to our prayers, but we do not always take the detour. We want to stay with what is comfortable. Change and not knowing what lies ahead is scary. Yet that’s the story of Mary and Joseph and the Magi. Detours, disruptions, and joy and awe and gratitude for the way that God is working in us and working through us.

Our world is unpredictable right now. We do not know what this new year will bring but if we stay close to God through prayer and study and worship, our path and our detours will be revealed. So today we remember the Magi who listened to God and who took the detours.