

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany celebrates the story in Matthew of the magi who came to find Jesus.

This is a very dense, theologized passage, but on the face of it seems pretty straight forward. To situate ourselves, Bethlehem is about 10 km (6.2 miles) due south of Jerusalem. If you saunter along, it takes two hours to walk there from Jerusalem. So the area in which all this is played out is pretty small from our perspective.

As Rev. Jan said during the run up to the Christmas pageant, there is no number of magi specified, so no limit to those folks who can dress up in the pageant. The word magi is pretty interesting and is a clue to how this portion of Matthew was constructed. This is the title of the both Joseph and Daniel in the First Testament. There are other places it is used and in all these cases there is a double meaning. It could mean prince or wise man, perhaps both at the same time. Coming from 'the east' really points this to the Book of Daniel, who became the principal wise man and, at least administratively, a prince in Babylon, and to a prior Joseph who also had prophetic dreams. Tying this to Daniel and Joseph, which the folks reading this passage or hearing it read would do because the magi came from the east and Joseph was a dreamer, the story becomes eschatological and so the miracle details like a star that moves and can actually indicate a specific place and prophetic dreams would present no trouble for an ancient audience. It also clues the reader that this is God appointed material, not simply a description of a visit by people that will remind you that Jesus' birth was a special thing, although it was that too, of course. They are looking for a king that their auguries tell them has been born in Israel. When they tell Herod he is very troubled because this king would be a threat to his throne. He wants to know where the child is, but we know this is not to worship him, but to kill him.

In any event, the magi came to find Jesus about a year after his birth. We know that because Herod made his calculations about when Jesus was born in the passage in Matthew right after this one. They give precious gifts, but even then Mary and Joseph would know that two of the gifts, frankincense and myrrh, are also used for the preparation of a dead body. Then they leave without going back to tell Herod about Jesus. Herod's troops will take about two hours to get to Bethlehem. What happens when they get there comes in the passage of Matthew right after what we have heard read.

But what about you? Matthew says you are not far from the King. You are one of the magi coming to worship Jesus. It will take you two hours, metaphorically, to find Jesus, this new King. And the gift you give is going to be precious: it is your whole self. And then you will have to go a different way after you give that gift. So read the passage again and see yourself in it. You are not Herod or his troops. You have been chosen to worship the King.