

**Sermon: Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2024 – Isaiah 60 and Matthew 2
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley**

There are a few times in the Church year when our global connections are very much in the foreground. Pentecost is one such time, with its stories of believers from many lands hearing their own languages being spoken; World Communion is another, as we consider all manner of local breads being broken in Churches around the world; and today we celebrate the ancient festival of the Epiphany, when we recall Magi from afar coming to see the Christ child.

Over the centuries the Magi have intrigued Christian scholars, as we seek to learn more about who they were and where they came from. They appear to be familiar with dealing with the ruling class, but they were not likely Kings themselves – that terminology got applied several centuries later. Perhaps they were astrologers or astronomers or both. Their most likely point of origin seems to be Persia and with that, we often surmise that their religious tradition was Zoroastrian and that they may have been priests in that faith. And while the Biblical text speaks of three gifts, it gives no indication whether there were 2 Magi or 3 Magi or a much larger group.

Personally, I am fascinated by those questions of identity, assuming that the whole story isn't just stylized, but today I want to set aside those questions and look instead at how the Magi have been portrayed, and what difference that makes to us as Christians in 2024.

Two weeks ago today on Christmas Eve, I wondered aloud “what came next” for the various characters in the Nativity story and for us, and in so doing I went looking for visual images of shepherds, magi and the like from nativity sets. And what I found with the Magi, almost without exception, is that one of the three is black. That was the case with the nativity set I grew up with: nobody looked particularly middle-Eastern, everybody appeared to be of northern European extraction except for that one wise man.

For a long time I have wondered if this is problematic, or a good thing. Is there something positive and respectful being portrayed here, or something else? My worry was that these depictions of the Magi may have been playing off a phenomenon known as “exoticism” – a tendency among colonial powers to look at the inhabitants of lands they had overrun as quaint, unusual, and exotic, turning the appearances and cultural traditions of the peoples of those lands into demeaning caricatures of themselves. As we know, cultural appropriation is still a problem in 2024, and was extremely common in the 19th and 20th centuries, in the days of the colonial “scramble for Africa.”

But what I've learned this week is that portraying one of the Magi as black is much older than that. Stated as early as 700 CE, by an English monk known as the venerable Bede, around the year 1500 it became widespread to depict three named Magi, one of whom is black and, typically, quite regal in bearing. There was Melchior, usually depicted as European; Caspar, either European or Asian; and the black Magi, Balthazar.

I've also learned that while some may view him as a token character in the story, and to be honest, only the artist can tell you what was in their heart, the blackness

of Balthazar is an important point of connection for many people of colour, as it invites them to see themselves more fully in the story of Christ's birth. PhD student Dontay M Givens II writes, "The blackening of Balthazar allowed the African to exit from the realm of the European social imagination and to take on flesh". Recent art exhibitions in Los Angeles and London displayed nativity paintings from the 14th and 15th centuries and the youth poet laureate of London, Theresa Lola, was invited to imagine what the encounter with the Christ child was like from Balthazar's viewpoint. Her poem in response is entitled, "Look at the Revival":

I am heading home

carrying the strange weight of my last encounter.

A child shouts 'Balthazar the Black King', the words shake in my ear like a drunk fly.

The ground seems to be opening its teeth, either to bite or to kiss me— my eyes feel foreign. I guess to know deeply, one must look deeply.

Plants are blooming from the ground, their leaves have the surreal spread of angel wings. Bewildered I swallow ginger powder, hope the sharp taste will jolt me awake from this strange scene. Stars begin falling like a rainy revival.

Should I promise my people this is hope arriving?

My job often feels like a hefty stone but today I am powered by a fierce awe. I say to the stunned people let us look deeply to know this hope deeply.

These words from young black writers give me hope, and tie in with new global understandings that people from many lands, of all different hues of skin including black, have been intimately involved with Jesus right from the start. And that's an important shift to make if we want to engage Christianity as it is presently lived on this planet, rather than remaining stranded in the colonial European Christianity of centuries gone by.

On screen is a map from 2019, of our global Christian family.

<https://www.gordonconwell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Picture1-7.png> Of the five main areas where Christianity is found, Africa has the highest population (667 M), followed by Latin America (612 M), followed by Europe (565 M). Asia is a bit behind, and North America well behind that. And for those wondering if this rise in Latin American and African Christianity is just a blip, no, it was already the case when I was ordained in 1988. Truth be told, if our current-day nativity scene were to be more representative, there would be a *number* of people of colour in the scene.

The festival of the Epiphany, and the brief season that follows, keeps coming back to the light and dark images of the scripture readings we heard this morning: the star in the sky, the light of the nations, darkness portrayed as lostness. Dontay Givens expands on this in his essay, and the importance of not following the common equation of white being good and black being bad, but rather embracing in Christ's unfolding story a sense of global, glorious call and response. All of God's beloved children are called to step out of the cloudy shadows of despair and anger and fear and into the glorious sunlight of love: all nations, all parts of the sexual spectrum, everyone. All people, everywhere, have gifts to bring as they embrace God's highest intentions for the life of the world. In the arrival of the Magi, in Isaiah's words of hope speaking into the chaotic despair of a people just

emerging from exile, God speaks to all and honours all with hope, and in return receives honour and devotion and love expressed in many ways.

So I meet Balthazar humbly, knowing that I have much to learn from him, and remind myself that no matter what we do locally, we are always part of something much bigger, more diverse, global in the best possible ways. Whether the people of the northern hemisphere will be once again be intrigued by the light, well, we will see, but it's clear that the good news of Jesus Christ and God's boundless, reconciling love is not old news to be cast aside. God's love is still speaking in this world, still acting, still inspiring, and that is a good and glorious thing. Amen!

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