



January 6, 2008

Focus Scripture
Matthew 2:1-12

Additional Scriptures
Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12

We thank you, O God, for revealing your love in the gift of a child. Stir our hopes. Prepare us for mysteries that can change us. Ready us for dreams that may set us on a new direction. Ground us in your wisdom, and help us follow your call. Amen.

Where Is the Child?

Wise ones and powerful ones ask "Where is the child?" for different ends. *Epiphany*, the name for the season we enter, comes from a Greek word that means "manifestation." Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ to the world. It reveals God's coming in unexpected places and people. It reveals that God's coming in Jesus is for all who would follow its light.

Focus Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

The details of Matthew's Christmas story illustrate how Matthew's community understood the events of Jesus' life as grounded in Hebrew Scriptures. The threat of Herod to the child Jesus echoes the story of Pharaoh and the child Moses (Exodus 2:1-10). In both cases, a child is saved from a tyrant's intent to kill that tragically victimizes other innocents. In both cases, the child grows up to lead God's people. Verse 6 quotes Micah 5:2 to reveal that Jesus comes as the promised one of God. The closing verse recalls several stories in the Hebrew Scriptures that link dreams and deliverance (for example, Joseph in Genesis 41).

The Christmas story of Matthew differs greatly from Luke's story. There are no shepherds, except the one who has come to shepherd all the people of God. But there are magi. Magi are not kings. "Magi" referred to a priestly group in ancient Persia and Babylon. Their work combined elements of astrology, astronomy, and dreams. "Wise ones" is a more accurate synonym than kings.

Matthew gives no indication of how many magi there were. The three gifts may have been a key factor in the popular notion of three magi. Any number, however, is pure speculation.

What is clear is their identity as Gentiles. They may have connected this star's appearance to a Jewish king because of contact with Jews who remained in Babylon after the end of exile. But nowhere is there any suggestion that the magi are Jewish. In Matthew, the most Jewish of the gospels, that is a critical point. Outsiders have come to seek the promised Messiah.

Why would Herod react with fear? Herod the Great was known for extensive building projects in Jerusalem, including the temple. But Herod was also

known for ruthlessness. Herod had one wife and two sons killed, in addition to many political rivals. Herod died within a year or two of Jesus' birth. In those final years, his paranoia about rivals was infamous. So Herod instructs the magi to report Jesus' whereabouts to him. But the magi disobey. Some disobedience must be risked, especially if obedience endangers innocents. Long before, Hebrew midwives disobeyed Pharaoh out of respect for God (Exodus 1:16-17). Their civil disobedience gave protection to Moses. The magi's defiance gave protection to Jesus.

Two key themes in the focus scripture play large roles in our other texts. One is the fulfilling of God's promises. The other is God's inclusion of those deemed "outsiders" by society and religion. The coming of God's light in **Isaiah 60:1-6** gathers the "nations." The Hebrew word translated as "nations" is the same as "Gentiles." God's glory comes to all. In **Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14**, the psalmist calls upon the keeping of God's promises by a just ruler. Such justice embraces those who are usually "left out": the poor; the needy; and the oppressed. We hear in **Ephesians 3:1-12** that the "mystery hidden for all ages" is revealed by God's Spirit. Verse 6 identifies that mystery with the inclusion of Gentiles in Christ's body.



These texts of Epiphany reveal more than God's coming. They reveal what response that coming evokes. What do you find most revealing in these texts: about God; about yourself; about those we consider "insiders" or "outsiders"? When has faith turned your life in a different direction? What wisdom do these texts reveal about what it means to follow God's leading?

If you have Internet access, visit www.spiritseasons.com to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage. Use user name *spirit* and password *linking*.

