

**The Epiphany of Our Lord 2022** (observed)

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

January 9, 2022

Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The Bible does not change, but culture changes, and language changes. In the late 1800s, there was an attempt to create a new English translation of the Bible. The King James Version was approaching three hundred years of complete domination in the English speaking world. The attempt, after three hundred years, produced a Bible in 1901. Called the American Standard Version. In the 1950s, that Bible was updated by scholars. The new update was called *Revised Standard Version*. It was revised. My first Bible, given to me by parents, was the RSV. And then in the 1980s, they studied it some more and made more changes. And so by the time I entered divinity school in 1991 we had the *NEW Revised Standard Version*. Which is the version that we use in worship here. You just heard it. And in the last couple of months, they have released another update. Which will be published this spring. And that will be called— you have to take a deep breath— the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. NRSVue.

And in this the NRSVue, they have replaced the term *wise men* with the word *Magi*. The use of the term *wise men* was universalized by the King James Version of 1604, but most other English Bibles prior to King James also used the term *wise men*. Coverdale, Tyndale, the Geneva Bible— if those names mean anything to you— they all said *wise men*. Now, the biblical text says *Magoi*, the plural of *magos*. So when people use the term *Magi*, they are using a transliteration of the Bible, not a translation. Turning the vowels and consonants into an approximate equivalent in English. Abraham is a transliteration. Jericho is a transliteration. Proper nouns are transliterated. So when this NRSVue says *Magi*, it is just copying the Greek word into English, without attempting to say what it means.

And that's fine, that's okay, because in Greek— the language Matthew used when he wrote this down— in Greek, the word is also a transliteration of someone else's word. The Greek-speaking world was borrowing this term from Persia. In Persian, it was *magush*. The *magush* were members of a caste in Persian society, a high caste who were in charge of learning, such as science and medicine and math. And that's really all we know. That kind of learning often involved studying the stars, or what we might call "celestial phenomena." And obviously, the *Magi* in today's gospel are studying celestial phenomena. And so they could be called astronomers or astrologers. When John Wycliffe put out a Bible in English— which was a crime— a hundred years before the birth of Martin Luther, and two hundred years before King James, Wycliffe used the term "astrologer."

And so the term “wise men” is not completely incorrect. “Astrologer” or “Seer” or even “Scientist” might not be completely incorrect. But because we know so little, and because what little we know does not have a very good match in English, it’s probably best and more prudent to say, “Magi.” One word that is not correct is the word “king.” I have cross-checked dozens of Bibles in various time periods, in five or six different languages. And I have never found a Bible that used the word “king” to describe these guys. The word *Magi* does not mean king. Although perhaps they were a privileged, hereditary class of individuals, a kind of royalty. But not kings.

The portrayal of the *Magi* as kings is part of the artistic commentary on this story. Part of Christian culture which is derived from the prophet Isaiah, from the words we just read moments ago. And our psalm refrain, “All kings shall bow down before him.” How the *Magi* became kings has a lot to do with art, with tradition, and with folk culture. And it has a lot to do with the one person whom Matthew does describe as a king, other than Jesus. King Herod. So-called Herod the Great. Who in the verses which follow our gospel reading for the day murders innocent infants and toddlers, and sends Mary, Joseph, and their newborn fleeing for their lives into Egypt. Because Herod is wicked, many of the medieval and renaissance traditions for Epiphany are subversive. Subversive in that they subvert monarchy, they mock and undermine monarchy. Traditions such as making a boy “king for the day.” The texts invite a comparison between good kings and bad kings. Particularly if you include Isaiah chapter sixty, which is so influential on Christian preaching and Christian art that Matthew himself seems like a bit of optional commentary on Isaiah. Isaiah is the tail wagging the dog of Matthew’s *Magi*.

So it’s okay if you have kings in your nativity set, or in your painting of the birth of Jesus. It’s a scene that has been heavily influenced by other parts of the Bible and by culture. But for Matthew, the *Magi* are important because they are religious outsiders. They are, in other words, Gentiles. They do not learn from the law and prophets. They do not know Isaiah or Jeremiah, much less Abraham or Moses. Whether they are wise men or scientists or astrologers, they are surely intellectually curious. They are willing to travel enormous distances in their pursuit of the truth of this star, this celestial phenomenon, that they have observed. Meanwhile, *When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.* Herod’s legitimacy as the king of the Jews was a troubled proposition from the beginning. And so the legitimacy of the entire political and religious establishment is subverted by these foreign strangers, these Gentiles, these askers of troublesome questions, these... *Magi*. And that’s really what Matthew wants us to see. The fake king of the Jews– the poser, the pretender, the tyrant. Versus the real king of the Jews. And that the real king of the Jews is the light of nations, or at least will become the light of nations.

The issue of the *Magi* is a question for the Church, and for the Church’s evangelism. When outsiders come, asking hard questions, and unable or unwilling to appreciate what we think we know, do we welcome them, and do we ultimately lead them or point them to Jesus? Or are we like Herod and the chief priests and the scribes, afraid and defensive? Our congregation’s external communications task force has been re-imagining evangelism. What if the people who seeking the light are not coming to church for the same reasons that people came in earlier generations.

What if they are seeking light in ways that many religious communities are not able to grasp? This task force has labeled five kinds of people who might be seeking the light, and the light sometimes shines in a special way here at Dove of Peace. Some of those people are seeking understanding. Seeking beauty. Seeking connection. Seeking meaningful service to others. Seeking sanctuary from religion that has been hurtful or damaging. That may be different from those of us who were seeking confirmation classes for our children. Or seeking other married couples to socialize with. Or were seeking lots of fun programs because we had lots of free time. Their needs may be different than what ours once were. But if we look at who we are today— if we shed our expectations about what church used to be— then our present may be the right prelude to our future.

The NRSV-ue also replaced wise men with *Magi* because the word Matthew used, *magoi*, is plural and is gender-inclusive. Matthew didn't specify that they were men. So why should our translation say that? The Bible has passages that are pretty patriarchal and pretty chauvinistic. But when we translate, do we need to make the Bible even more chauvinistic? Sometimes the original is refreshing. Sometimes what we think we know isn't what the words actually say.

Magi still seek the light. They come from other directions. Using other maps. Can we be the star, or at least show them the star, to help them find what they seek? Amen.