

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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We've turned Epiphany into such a sweet story – with a leading star, three kings, and unique presents. But Matthew doesn't tell a nursery story connected to Jesus' birth. He tells us something far stranger — and far more serious. He tells us about magi who were outsiders, foreigners, even Zoroastrian priests who showed up in Jerusalem with gifts.

For some Christians, Epiphany is still the day of gifts— not Christmas— because of these magi. While we may know the three gifts as something nostalgic in Christmas music or decor, what if their gifts weren't sentimental... but necessary? What if this story isn't really about how charming it is, but about what actually helps people survive?

Matthew says these magi saw a sign in the heavens and they move toward it. That alone is remarkable. These foreigners noticed something holy happening — and they didn't stay put. They packed up and got moving. Meanwhile, the locals — Herod and Jerusalem — were troubled. What this reveals is that scripture can point the way, but power will try to use it for its own ends. Nevertheless, the magi finally found the child, offered their gifts, and then — quietly but crucially — went home by another way. That is the Epiphany story.

Epiphany is a story about guidance. And it is also a story about refusing the routes empire assigns. Because whenever God shows up in the world,

certain people get nervous. After all, Herod isn't just a villain in a story. He is a pattern that we know too well. Power is often terrified of losing control. Power tends to treat vulnerability as a threat. Power often risks other people's lives to protect itself. And that same fear of losing control is not ancient. It is still with us.

This last week Renee Nicole Good was killed by an ICE agent in Minneapolis. We saw military operations conducted in Venezuela, Ukraine, and Palestine. Across this country and around the world, families live with fear about raids, detentions, and sudden disappearances. We don't have to argue politics in church to tell the truth about pain. Bodies are in danger. Mothers are grieving. Communities are afraid.

And, Epiphany doesn't look away from that darkness. Instead, it shines light into it. After all, God does not promise the dark won't be real. What God does promise is that we won't walk through it alone — and that there is always the possibility of another way. And that's where these gifts come in.

What were the gifts the magi brought? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We've layered on symbolism — gold for his kingship, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh foreshadowing his death — and they can be that. But they are also something simpler and more urgent. These gifts are what a vulnerable family would need if their world was about to turn upside down.

You see, gold isn't just a royal sign. It's portable stability — the kind of wealth you can carry if you have to leave in the middle of the night. Frankincense and myrrh aren't just theology in a bottle. They are care for bodies — breath, wounds, exhaustion, recovery — especially a mother's body and a baby's

fragile life in a dangerous world. These gifts are not random. They are exactly what a family on the edge of danger would need. For, these Epiphany gifts aren't about impressing; they're about sustaining.

That's where today's story collides with our own. We live in a culture that spends enormous amounts of money on what people don't need — while real needs go uncovered. We're very good at buying things: gadgets, stocking-stuffers, novelty gifts, things that end up in a drawer or a landfill. But, we're less practiced at asking what will actually help someone get through the next hard thing. We care more about the act of giving, than the action behind giving.

Which is why what we've done together this Advent matters so much. Through our Advent Project — raising money and items for Refugee One, Opportunity Palestine, and our Spanish-speaking congregations — we didn't just give something. We gave gifts that actually meet needs: housing, food, protection, jackets, community, and dignity. Not charity as performance, but solidarity as neighbor-love.

These gifts are Magi-kind-of gifts — resources aimed at vulnerability, not vanity. And we do this work each year not because we want to prove we are better people, but because God has already met us with mercy. For if we stand here and say that Jesus is for all people — the foreigner, the outsider, the lost, and the lonely — then our giving can't stop at our citizens, church members, and put-together people. For giving, like God gives, is about relationship and real transformation for all. When the magi left Bethlehem, Matthew says they went home by another way. Not just a different road — but a different loyalty. They didn't go back to Herod. They didn't cooperate

with fear. They let the light change their route. These magi had a profound moment of experience that we honor as the Epiphany.

And that's where the star cards come in. As you came in today, you were handed a star word— not as a fortune cookie, not as a personality test, but as a quiet invitation. The magi followed light they didn't control. They listened for dreams. They went home by another route. Your star word is a small way of staying open to that same kind of guidance. Take a look at your card. Maybe your word is courage.

Or empathy.

Or heal.

Or welcome.

Or authenticity.

Or community.

Or tenderness.

Or endurance.

Your word isn't a prediction. Rather, it's a doorway — a way of noticing where God's light keeps nudging you in this time after Epiphany: toward all people, toward holy risk, toward deeper love. Put this word somewhere you'll see it often. When you do glimpse it like the magi saw that star in the sky, you can ponder how God has moved through, around, or is connected to that word.

And when worship ends today, we remember that God doesn't just give us words. God gives us people, / tables, / and enough to share. Today, we celebrate and leave with pie — and that, too, is holy — because bodies need feeding and joy is part of the gospel. We celebrate our Advent's Project's journey toward deeper solidarity. We leave with each other. Because that's

what star light does. It gathers people. It nourishes bodies. It makes us brave enough to choose another way.

So may our gifts this season meet real needs. May our light lead us. And may we too go home following God's way. Amen.