Love Is . . . Revealed
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Isaiah 60:1–6; Matthew 2:1–12

The Magi arrive late to the Christmas party every year, but we would never think of packing up the story and heading toward Lent without them.

Christmas is not complete until these travelers finally appear. With their Eastern exoticism, their generous—if puzzling—gift-giving, and their curious blend of farsighted and inward wisdom, the Magi are indispensable to the story of Jesus' birth.

Along with their elaborate garments, they bring elaborate language. *Magi* is the plural of *magus*, an Old Persian term of uncertain meaning, used variously—sometimes approvingly, sometimes suspiciously—for people skilled in hidden or specialized knowledge. Across the centuries, scholars have described them as astrologers, astronomers, priest-kings, and magicians.

What all these descriptions have in common is this: magi are people who see what others overlook. They perceive meaning where others see only routine. They discern deeper layers of reality embedded in the ordinary humdrum of daily life.

And Christmas is, in some important respects, the most ordinary of seasons, because what, after all, is more ordinary than the birth of a baby? It happens every day. We do not alert the media when a child is born.

Yet for those whose lives are shaped by that birth—especially the child—nothing is ever the same again. Ordinary events can carry extraordinary meaning. Seemingly small beginnings can ripple outward in ways no one can predict.

That paradox—the ordinary bearing the weight of the extraordinary—is precisely what the Magi recognize and what the Magi represent. And it is one reason Matthew includes them in his telling of Jesus' birth.

Of course, Matthew includes the story of important people coming from the east as the fulfillment of prophecy. Isaiah envisions a day when God vindicates Zion—Jerusalem's liturgical name—and declares, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn." With the help of God's grace, God's people will become what they were always meant to be: a light to the nations, a window into a better reality, a bearer of genuinely good news for all creation.

Writing decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, Matthew sees that vision taking flesh at Jesus' birth. In Jesus, divine love is revealed—love powerful enough to draw seekers, disrupt expectations, and transform lives. Those longing for a Messiah begin to recognize that the Messiah has arrived.

But Matthew's point goes deeper than prophecy fulfilled. In the Magi, he offers a universal lesson about God's ability to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary. An ordinary couple. An ordinary town. An ordinary birth. An ordinary child—to most people. But to a few unlikely observers—not Jews, not members of the chosen people, not seekers of Israel's Messiah—something extraordinary has occurred.

Guided by a celestial sign and an openness to wonder, these Gentile wisdom specialists perceive what others miss. They act on what is revealed to them. And in doing so, they become part of a story that has outlived empires. Two thousand years later, we still tell their story—something even they could never have imagined.

The poet T. S. Eliot, a modern magus of sorts, once named the condition most of us recognize all too well: "We had the experience but missed the meaning." That line is unsettling because it rings true. We sleepwalk through much of history—including our own lives. Even those of us confident in our political awareness, moral clarity, or social insight attend to only a narrow slice of reality. Our attention is limited—and relentlessly contested.

Which brings us back to the Magi. Of all the details Matthew could have included, why these figures? Why interrupt the story with sages from afar? What do they reveal—not only about Jesus, but about God, the world, and ourselves?

When I posed that question to my friends Tammy and Nancy over Christmas, Nancy offered a striking insight: the Magi lend credibility to a birth of questionable legitimacy. A virgin birth? Neighbors would have been skeptical. Shepherds claiming angelic visitations? Hardly reliable witnesses.

But sages? Scholars? Kings? Influencers of their time? Now people pay attention. Their presence confers weight. More importantly, their response goes beyond belief. They act. They travel. They give gifts.

And those gifts become central—not only to Christmas, but to the whole story of Jesus. Christianity is, at heart, a faith of receiving and giving. The Magi do not merely admire the child; they respond with gifts. Their revelation – God's gift to them – leads to action – their gifts to the Christ child. Love, once revealed, must be embodied.

That pattern—revelation leading to response—is exactly what we rehearse every time we gather at the communion table. God gives first. We respond. The Magi kneel before Christ with gifts in their hands; we come forward with open hands of our own. In both cases, ordinary materials become carriers of divine meaning, and human lives are reoriented by what they receive.

Here at this table is where the story of the Magi most clearly intersects with the celebration of communion. In both moments, God's love is revealed not through spectacle, but through material things—gold and incense, bread and cup. Nothing mystical happens *instead* of the ordinary; the ordinary becomes the means through which grace is disclosed.

The Magi do not fully understand what they are doing. Neither do we. They offer gifts whose meaning will only become clear with time. Revelation, in Scripture, is rarely complete or final. It unfolds as we return again and again, attentive, receptive, willing to be changed.

The same is true at the communion table. We receive bread and cup whose depth we never exhaust. A loaf and grape juice—what appear to be modest elements, barely a snack—carry a meaning the church dares to proclaim: “This is my body. This is my blood.” In giving himself away, Jesus reveals love in its fullest form.

As Protestants, we do not fixate on what happens *to* the elements on the table. We focus instead on what God’s grace reveals *through* them—about Christ, about ourselves, and about the world God loves. Communion reveals that Christ gives himself entirely away, and that we are invited into that same self-giving love.

Just as the Magi leave Bethlehem “by another road,” communion, at its best, sends us back into the world changed—more attentive, more generous, more courageous in love. The Table is not an ending but a sending.

Is that your experience of communion? And if it is not, might it become so?

Epiphany reminds us that God’s love is revealed again and again—in stars and strangers, in infants and insights, in bread broken and cups shared. Communion is not a pause in the story; it is one of the ways the story continues. At the Table, Christ is revealed not as an idea to be admired, but as a gift to be received—and then lived.

As we leave the season of Christmas and step into a new year, may we practice the attentiveness of the Magi and the openness of communicants. May we recognize the grace already placed into our hands. And having received it, may we go another way—bearing that revealed love into a world still longing for light.

Thanks be to God.