

A Epiphany 2026
Saint Barnabas' Church, Falmouth MA
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For much of our world, today represents the end of an extended holiday season, a day to pull ourselves together after wild living with family and friends—it's a wrap

We may bask in the holiday afterglow or feel exhausted by too much frivolity, but today millions travel home or at least plan a long winter's nap before the first full week of 2026

Today, we also commemorate the Feast of Epiphany, one of the more eccentric and theologically packed stories of the Gospels, with the visit of the foreign magi

With the visit of the magi, we encounter mixed vibes of joy and fear, the insiders and outsiders, bucolic sheep who meet exotic multicultural visitors

As we reflect upon the magi's visit, let's consider how they impact the mood of the larger Christmas story

On the surface, the easiest part notes that they arrive bearing gifts, the obvious biblical pretext for our season's frenzied holiday shopping

That's beautiful—we all love gifts and cooing babies

But beneath the surface, we feel the fugal theme of anxiety and forboding as we learn the magi are agents of Herod, whose rage leads him into a plot of infanticide to snuff out God's greatest gift

Our story tells us that Herod secretly recruits the magi with a cynical claim that Herod wants to pay homage to Jesus

Are the magi clueless, or are they menacing co-conspirators with Herod?

Matthew also tells us about 4-5 mission-critical dreams that change the course of Jesus's destiny, and our story ends by telling us that the magi respond to a dream and blow off Herod's menacing mission

The magi story is fun, at times frightening, and yet it leaves us moderns with vexing gaps in the narrative

For example, the story tells us about three gifts—but never mentions gold, frankincense and myrrh, a later riff on the story—yet the story never says how many magi arrived

We don't know how long they stayed with the holy family—three hours, three days, three months: who knows, but speculation would make for a wonderful short story

When taken as part of the whole Christmas story, I find it striking that only Jesus and Mary link Christmas with Jesus' adult ministry

Everyone else walks off stage and goes home a separate way, never to be heard from again—including the magi and Joseph, Jesus' father

Never in Jesus' adult life does someone remember him as the one with such a wild and memorable birth story

Where does this gospelling—this proclaiming the Good News of our salvation—put the visit of the magi?

First, let's ask what Matthew means by the *magoi*—of, if you prefer the singular, a magus

Ancient histories spoke of a priestly caste with power to interpret dreams, and stories flourished about exotic *magoi* who were Zoroastrians

By the time of Jesus' birth, the title of *magoi* had diversified into those who were adept in secret forms of lore and magic

Centuries of colorful story telling have softened the blasphemous sense of what the magi represented to God-fearing Jews of Jesus' day

These characters were more akin to gypsies or circus characters than the Temple—I'm sure they were written off by many as horoscope fanatics or Tarot card psychics, the very epitome of Gentile idolatry that frightened good Israelites

Magoi included scientific astronomers, charlatans, magicians, fortune tellers and those indulging in occult arts—in short, people who we might identify as the ‘unusual suspects’ at the manger

The magi's interpreting the stars suggests their role as astronomers, but the word ‘magi’ has the same linguistic root as ‘magic’

They were, in short, part of the cultic and religious diversity of the Middle East that thrives to this very day

In your heart of hearts, you would not want your daughter or granddaughter to date a magus, and high school guidance counselors do not encourage their charges in this vocational direction

Why would an otherwise pious Jew like Matthew include a story about such exotic creatures?

It is central to Matthew's purpose that the evangelist links the magi visit directly with the threatened slaughter of innocents by Herod, a story that immediately follows the magi in Matthew's Gospel

In this brief—but densely packed—chapter, the evangelist provides us with a gospel in miniature, a premonition of homage and harm that will confront our Savior in his adult life and ministry

The magi represent the outsiders, the Gentiles, the spreading of salvation beyond Israel itself as they recognize Jesus to be the Savior

Rather than playing into Herod's hand, however, the magi go home another way to escape complicity in the demonic act of killing the Christ before he outgrows the manger

But most importantly of all, Jesus takes on from birth the divine vocation that is revealed to both Israel and Gentile alike

Matthew lays down the marker that from birth to death, some will come to pay Jesus homage while others seek his harm—God embodies the same ambiguity about safety and harm that we navigate every day of our lives

From the 4th century to this very day and until Christ's coming again, Christians proclaim the ultimate glory and mystery of Christmas

When creation went awry, our Creator took on human flesh to come among us, to identify with us—with threats of harm in his first days to ultimate crucifixion in his last—so that we might be saved and be able to dwell in the life of God

With the magi, our Christmas season comes to an exotic and joyful conclusion

Next week, our Gospel describes the other great Christological moment before Easter, Jesus' baptism by John

In the manger as in the River Jordan, we witness another of God's manifestations—God's epiphanies—in the person of Jesus Christ

Today's story ends by reminding us that the magi went home by another way

However exotic you think daily life might be, our eccentricity pales in comparison to smelly shepherds and perfumed magi who surround baby Jesus

Our most florid days are pretty vanilla compared to Jesus's first days on earth

The magi went home transformed by their encounter with the Christ child

As we end our Christmas season, I hope we might go home another way, too

For such is the purpose of the Church: to proclaim the Christ, to transform real lives, to go home another way

In the coming weeks at St Barnabas, we'll have occasion to discuss ways in which our parish life goes home another way, too, with reimagined goal and priorities

It is no coincidence that today's Parish Forum gives voice to our robust imaginations and hopes for new pathways at StB's in 2026

The word 'epiphany' simply means to make God manifest and known in daily life, whether in exotic or quiet ways

In our transition from Christmas to Epiphany, may we continue to see God's glory manifest in the world, may we continue to share the Good News with those who look like us and with multicultural others who might seem a bit exotic and 'different' than the usual suspects who inhabit our lives

In this spirit, I wish a joyful and adventuresome Epiphany season