

Consumed by the Fire of a Star



Focus scripture
Matthew 2:1–12

Additional scriptures
Isaiah 60:1–6
Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14
Ephesians 3:1–12

The Magi were likely Zoroastrian astronomers: scientists who had learned to study stars as part of their religion. They would have been descendants from lands long at war with the ancient fathers of the Jewish and Christian faith. Their astronomical studies (perhaps speculations) and lore won them nothing but scorn and prejudice from the Romans of Jesus' day. They were thought to be obsessed to the point of being insane about their craft. They believed their god had charge of the stars until one day it was consumed by the fire of a star. Which is why they were consumed by the study of stars. It was this seemingly misplaced devotion that brought them to the feet of Christ.

Focus scripture: Matthew 2:1–12

The story of the visit of the wise ones is unique to the gospel of Matthew and sits in stark contrast to Luke's infancy narrative. Here there are no shepherds or angels celebrating the birth. These are important, educated foreigners who have travelled a great distance to discover what the "star sign" might reveal. They somehow know about the coming of a "ruler of the Jews" and seek help in finding him from Herod.

The wise ones (magi) understand this little child to be a divine gift, a future ruler of some sort, to be worshipped and honoured. In contrast, Herod sees this only as a potential threat to his power. Herod was frightened, "and all Jerusalem with him." We may assume that Herod was frightened by doubts about the security of his position. Since Herod's insecurities could easily have negative repercussions on the people under his control, it's no surprise that all Jerusalem trembled as well.

The wise ones conferred with Herod and his advisors and, after being set on the right path, continued on their way, following the star. The star led them to the home of the child. We can assume, given the distance that the magi have travelled, the child is no longer a newborn, and the magi find him, along with his mother, in his own home.

The term "epiphany" comes from the Greek meaning "appear, reveal, shine, give light." Starlight led the magi to discover the birth of a new hope, a gift to the world, a baby who would himself be called "the light of the world." The magi themselves brought gifts to honour the child, and in turn, were given the gift of revelation in a dream. Their trip home did not include a stop in Jerusalem; their journey home took a different path.

The themes of God's light and the journey to find it; the bringing of gifts; characteristics of a God-like or God-sent leader echo in the other readings for this week:

Isaiah 60:1–6 uses the image of light as a show of God's glory. That light, says Isaiah, will attract people from far and near. They will bask in the radiance, be filled with rejoicing, and will offer gifts to proclaim God's praise.

Psalm 72:1–7, 10–14 speaks of the ruler suffused with God's spirit. That ruler will be a gift to the people; acting in righteousness, compassion, and generosity. The poor will be cared for, justice will reign, and other rulers will recognize the value of this ruler.

Ephesians 3:1–12 is a retrospective appreciation for the way God calls each of us into the mysteries. We are not strangers; we are asked to share what we understand and even speak about what is yet to be revealed as though it is all part of the same gift. The writer claims access to God – even though he feels he doesn't deserve it. He then explains that his faith will help him to lead others to a deeper understanding.

• • • • •

These lectionary texts all tell about a variety of people who, for generations, were in search of the saviour. Even the descriptions of the saviour tell us as much about those who seek him, as it describes his true identity. If we take a compassionate look at the magi, the stars (if you will) of this day, we understand they devoted their lives to understanding their god. They don't agree with the things we believe about God, but they were willing to travel great distances to discover what their god would reveal to them...and who did they find? Jesus, the all-consuming light of love we've been following since before time began.

God of flaming skies, we set out on a journey to worship you. We know that along the way we will encounter you in the face of strangers and in the depths of despair. We know we will find you in our pain and in our rising joy. Meet us at the beginning; meet us at the end and walk with us in between. Amen.

If you have Internet access, visit www.seasonsonline.ca to access Spirit Sightings for connections between current events and the focus passage.



The Focus for All Ages



This session is designed for all ages to come together for approximately an hour to explore the story of the magi.

The story of the magi from the gospel of Matthew is the key story for this Day of the Epiphany, which ends the Season of Christmas. It is a story that is told and celebrated every year. It is a timeless story, one that all ages can hear and enjoy together over and over.

During this time of the year, church gatherings have a smaller attendance as people travel during the holiday time. This session is designed to provide an opportunity for different age groups to worship and celebrate

together. It also provides an opportunity for the generations to get to know one another better. A team other than the regular age-specific leaders might plan and lead this special session. The bulk of this one-hour session will be spent in the Respond zones. If you have only limited meeting space consider which activity zones to set up. Some zones may require a leader. For other zones the directions can be displayed so that participants can help each other. During the Bless time there will be an opportunity for those who wish to share the results of their activities in the different Respond zones. Pray that all participants will find new meaning in the story of the magi and their gifts for the Christ child.

Prepare

Before the session

- ❑ Read and prayerfully reflect on this week's focus scripture, Matthew 2:1-12, and [biblical background](#) material (p. 35).
- ❑ Bring [basic supply kit](#) (p. 2) and, if possible, *Seasons Songbook* (Volume 8) and *Seasons Music CD* (Volume 8), and CD or MP3 player; downloadable sheet music and MP3 recordings are available at www.seasonsonline.ca.
- ❑ Prepare a worship space with white or gold fabric, Bible with a bookmark placed in the focus passage, white Christ candle, matches, and offering basket.

Gather

- ❑ Bring star-shaped name tags cut from construction paper.
- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "You Are Holy/*Hamba Nathi*" (p. 42 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #21 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).
- ❑ Bring one or more photographs of a starry night sky; option: go to www.seasonsonline.ca and click on the Links tab, for links to images on the NASA website for January 6.

Engage

- ❑ Bring a nativity set, keeping the magi figures separate.

- ❑ Bring this week's resource sheet "[Following a Star](#)" and a large star shape (cardboard covered with kitchen foil) on a pole.

Respond

Choose one or more of the following activities and bring materials to set up the chosen zones.

- ❑ **Art zone:** chalk, pastels, glitter glue, glitter pens, dark blue or black construction paper, photos from Gather
- ❑ **Quiet zone:** copies of resource sheet "[Two Ways to Draw a Star](#)," glitter, narrow ribbon
- ❑ **Discussion zone:** copies of resource sheet "[The Magi](#)"
- ❑ **Music zone:** rhythm instruments, hymn books with Epiphany hymns; option: invite a music leader.
- ❑ **Outreach zone:** resource sheet "[Two Ways to Draw a Star](#)"; cinnamon stick (scented card activity); nylon netting squares, potpourri, rubber bands, ribbon, spoons, construction paper

Bless

- ❑ Bring, if possible, the song "May Peace Be with You" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #24 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).
- ❑ Bring several tapers and one tealight per person.



Consumed by the Fire of a Star

Scripture

Matthew 2:1–12

FOCUS To hear and celebrate the story of the visit of the magi

Gather

Welcome Greet participants as they arrive and ask them to write their names on star-shaped name tags, with older participants helping the younger ones.

Opening ritual Invite participants to gather around the worship space. Explain that today we are celebrating the “Epiphany.” Explain that the word “epiphany” comes from a Greek word that means “to display” or “to appear.” On this day we hear the story of the magi and the star they followed to Bethlehem.

Pray Light the candle and lead the group in the opening prayer, inviting the group to repeat the bolded line:

O God, as we light our candle,
we celebrate the light
that came into the world when Jesus was born.
We can be a light in the world too.

As we light our candle,
we also remember the star
that the magi followed.

We can be a light in the world too. Amen.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song “You Are Holy/*Hamba Nathi*” (p. 42 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #21 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8). As the group sings invite a volunteer to receive the offering.

Making connections

Invite participants to gather around the photographs of the starry night skies. Invite participants to talk about their experiences of the wonder of seeing stars in a night sky.

■ **How does it feel to look up at all those stars? Do some stand out more than others? Why?**

Explain that in today’s Bible reading a star plays an important part in the story.

Engage

Setting the scene

Invite several volunteers to use the figures from a nativity set to help re-tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Help them recall the details as told in the gospels of Matthew and Luke: the journey to Bethlehem, the stable, the angels and shepherds. Point out the figures of the magi and explain that the story of the magi is only told in the gospel of Matthew. Explain that the magi were wise ones who studied the stars and the night sky.

The Bible reading

Choose volunteers to carry the large star shape and the figures of the magi. Use the resource sheet “[Following a Star](#)” to tell the story based on **Matthew 2:1–12**, following the instructions as indicated on the resource sheet.

After the story Invite participants to form small groups that include both children and teenagers or adults to discuss the following questions as a way of reviewing the story:

- **What did the magi want to know from King Herod?**
- **Who did Herod ask so he could answer their question?**
- **Why do you think Herod was so worried about this little child?**
- **Why do you think the magi were so excited to find the child Jesus?**
- **What message did the magi receive in a dream? Why was it important?**

Connecting scripture with life

Our gifts The magi saw a star in the sky which symbolized for them the birth of a new ruler. For the Jews, the promise of a new ruler brought hope for peace and justice.

■ What is your hope for peace and justice today?

The magi brought special gifts to honour and celebrate Jesus, the new ruler.

■ What gifts might we bring to honour and celebrate Jesus' birth in these days?

Explain that the Respond zones include activities that can help us think more about the gifts that we can offer.

Respond

Review the choices of activities and invite the group to choose one or more zones in which to participate. Encourage older group members to help younger group members in each zone.

- **Art zone: Star paintings** The star is the main symbol of the Epiphany story. Invite participants to look again at the photos of the night sky and use the art supplies to create their own starry pictures. Older participants can write around the edges of their images some phrases from the scripture reading to recall the journey of the magi.
- **Quiet zone: Star Meditation** Silent meditation is a spiritual practice that is calming and promotes health. The star shape can be used as a tool to quiet the mind and body by consciously breathing in a slow meditative way while your eyes follow a pathway around the outside of the shape. Sit quietly and look at the picture of the "Meditation Star" on the resource sheet "[Two Ways to Draw a Star](#)." Spend several minutes of quiet time following the breathing pattern. You're invited to meditate in this way for a few minutes every morning or evening, during Epiphany so that it will become part of your spiritual practice and will become a habit if you ever need to calm your mind and body.
- **Discussion zone: Magi wondering** There is much to wonder about the story of the magi. Distribute copies of the resource sheet "[The Magi](#)" and Bibles and invite participants to learn more about the story of the magi. They might imagine that they are reporters, and write up their findings as a news story to submit to a church newsletter.
- **Music zone: Epiphany songs** The magi journeyed to Bethlehem to honour and praise the one whose star they saw in the sky. Light is a central image of Epiphany. Invite participants to look through the hymnals to find songs about light and other Epiphany hymns. Use the

rhythm instruments as you sing these songs together.

- **Outreach zone: Star Gifts** The star pattern on the resource sheet "[Two Ways to Draw a Star](#)" (or stars you have practiced drawing) can be used in the following ways to tell others the Good News about God's love with us:

Scented Card: 1. Fold a piece of construction paper to create a card. Use the star pattern (or a star shape that you have drawn) to cut a shape out of sandpaper. 2. Glue the shape to the front of the card and print a message on the outside of the card such as, "You are Loved;" "Feliz Navidad;" "Jesus Is Born," or create a design around the star on the front of the card. 3. Print a message of love on the inside to the person who will receive the card. 4. Rub a cinnamon stick over the sandpaper to release a cinnamon smell as a reminder of the frankincense and myrrh that the Magi gave to Jesus.

Star Photo Gift: On the middle of a piece of cardstock draw and then cut out a star shape using a craft knife or sharp scissors (young children will need the help of an adult). Tape a photo of yourself behind the star shape. (This can be done afterwards, at home.) Decorate the cardstock with art supplies or stickers and print your name and a message such as "Shine Light Shine" or "I Am a Light" on the front. Give your star photo gift to someone.

Potpourri Gift: One of the gifts of the magi was frankincense, used to make perfume. Provide supplies and invite participants to make perfume sachets as a gift of love to give to projects that work with disadvantaged people in the community. To make, place a spoonful of potpourri in the nylon netting; gather up

the sides, close tightly with a rubber band, and tie a length of ribbon around the rubber band. Prepare gift cards from construction paper to go with the sachets. Create a star using the star drawing practice or star

pattern from the resource sheet "[Two Ways to Draw a Star](#)" and use it as a tag on the potpourri package or place it inside the netting so it shows from the outside.

Bless

Gather again in the worship space and light the Christ candle. Invite participants to share what they have done in the activity zones.

Sing or listen to, if possible, the song "May Peace Be with You" (p. 10 in *Seasons Songbook*, Vol. 8; #24 on *Seasons Music CD*, Vol. 8).

Pray Distribute tealights and invite participants to use the tapers to light their candles from the Christ candle, placing them to form a pathway in the worship space moving out from the central candle. Invite the group to

repeat each line after you:

God of all creation,
We thank you for the light
that led the magi to Jesus.
May the light of Jesus' birth go with us,
everywhere we go
and in everything we do. Amen.

Send participants out with the following blessing:
"Go out to follow the light of the Epiphany star."

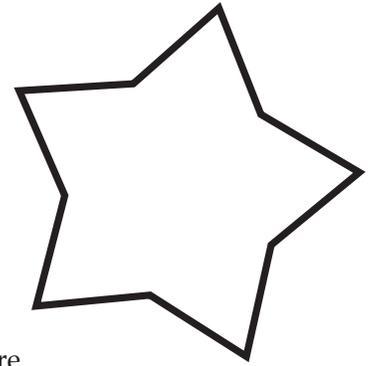
Reflect

In what ways did the group members participate in the story of the magi? What new insights emerged?



Following a Star

Based on Matthew 2:1-12



When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a special star appeared in the sky. (*Invite the volunteer holding the star to stand on one side of the room.*)

But this star didn't just shine in Bethlehem. People in faraway lands could see it. Some wise ones called magi, who studied the stars in the night sky, wondered when they saw this new star. What did it mean? (*Pause and invite participants to wonder aloud what the magi might be thinking.*)

The magi were sure that this was a special star, a star that announced the birth of a new king or ruler. They decided to look for this new ruler. Getting ready for the trip took a long time, especially because they didn't know exactly where they would be going or how long the journey would take. Camels had to be packed with bedding, food, clothing, pans, and everything else that they might need for a long trip. People had to be hired to take care of the camels, to cook the food, and to help the magi as they travelled. Finally, on one beautiful day, everything was ready. But the magi could not leave when the sun was shining. They waited until night so the star could show them the way. With only the moonlight and the light of this new star, they moved slowly across the land. (*Invite the volunteer holding the star to begin walking slowly around the room, with the three holding the magi figures following behind.*)

The star led the magi to Jerusalem and the magi stopped to see King Herod. It was the polite thing to do. Since King Herod was known to be a harsh king the magi didn't want to make him angry. So they asked for an audience with the king and King Herod asked them why they had come to his land.

The magi answered, "We have seen a new star in the sky. We believe this star means that a child has been born who will be king of the Jews. We have

come to worship this child. Can you tell us where we might find this baby?"

Everyone present gasped. King Herod was king of the Jews. This news worried the king a lot but he didn't let it show. Instead, King Herod turned away and called together the chief priests. "Where is this Messiah, the ruler for whom you are waiting, to be born?"

This wasn't a hard question for the chief priests of the Jews. "The prophets have told us that the Messiah will be born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea," they said.

When King Herod returned to the magi, he smiled and said, "Go to Bethlehem. When you find the child who is to be king of the Jews, let me know. I want to worship the child too." The magi left King Herod, pleased that they knew where to go and that the king seemed to be friendly.

They were almost at the end of their journey. The star continued to lead them until they came to a house in the village of Bethlehem. (*The one carrying the star stops beside the nativity scene and the three add their figures to the scene.*) To be truthful, it didn't look like a place where a king would live. But the magi were excited to find Mary and the child Jesus inside. They quickly unpacked the gifts they had brought: gold, and frankincense and myrrh, which were sweet-smelling expensive perfumes.

Then the magi left Bethlehem. (*The three take back their figures and the one carrying the star leads them away from the nativity scene.*) They planned to go back to Jerusalem to see King Herod on their way home. But that night they had a dream. In the dream God warned them not to tell King Herod about Jesus. So the magi went home by a different road. (*The one carrying the star turns in a new direction and leads the three magi away.*)



The Magi

What the gospel story does tell us...

Q What does the story say about where the magi came from?

A _____
 (clue: read Matthew 2:1)

Q What gifts had the magi brought for the new king?

A _____

 (clue: read Matthew 2:11)

What the gospel story doesn't tell us...

- which country they came from
- how many magi there were
- what their names were

What the traditions tell us...

Q Why do we think that there were three magi?

A Because there are three gifts mentioned in the story.

Q What does the word "magi" mean?

A Magi refers to Zoroastrian priests from ancient Persia or Babylon; originally magi were a tribe from ancient Media who were responsible for religious and funeral practices; they had a lot of influence in the Persian Empire until about 500 years before Jesus' birth and became influential again about 200 years after his birth

Q Why are the magi also called "wise ones"?

A Because they studied astronomy and dreams the magi gained an international reputation as astrologers; at that time astrology was considered an important science, so they were thought to be wise ones.

Q Why do we sometimes see the magi named as Balthazar, Melchior, and Caspar?

A These are names that were given to them in a Greek manuscript written about 500 years after Jesus' birth.

What about those three gifts?

GOLD has been highly valued since prehistoric times; used for money, ornaments, and in rituals.

FRANKINCENSE is a resin from the bark of a tree that grows in Arabia and Africa; used in incense, medicines, and perfumes.

MYRRH is the gum or sap from a tree that grows in Somalia and Ethiopia; it is used today in incense and perfumes; in ancient times it was used as an anointing oil, embalming agent, and as incense at funerals and cremations.

Did you know?
 Frankincense and myrrh were more valuable in biblical times than gold!

All three were usual offerings and gifts given to a king. But some traditions add other symbolism to these gifts...

THE GIFT OF GOLD was a symbol of virtue, of Jesus' spiritual kingship.

THE GIFT OF FRANKINCENSE was a symbol of prayer, of Jesus' priesthood (as it was used as incense by priests in worship).

THE GIFT OF MYRRH was a symbol of suffering, of Jesus' death (as it was used as an embalming oil).

■ **Knowing the story of Jesus' whole life, what might these gifts from the magi symbolize?**

