

New light on the Epiphany

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Sometimes we grow weary of the same texts as they come up year after year. We may even suggest that maybe this year we should not do the Christmas pageant, but a different story instead.

Bad idea. It's like changing the menu of a traditional meal the whole family expects for Christmas dinner. It may be that we have decided what the story means and think, Oh, no, here we go again. That is why it is so vitally important to read or see as many interpretations of it as we can find.

The stories of Jesus in the Gospels are especially well represented in paintings in the church, and they have completely refreshed my reading of the texts—partly because the artists are so literal to it and yet so filled with imagination. If it says the heavens were torn open at Jesus' baptism, they will paint a jagged break in the heavens.

And if the text says Wisemen from the East, they let their imaginations run. While there are three gifts, it does not say there were three Wisemen. The painters are free to see into what Matthew was about in this telling of the birth of Jesus: that the world has come to this amazing birth.

By tradition, the Wisemen have names and came from all directions to the East. I've seen the painting in the Market Church in Halle, and I understood that this tradition is in a way some kind of comment on the story of Noah and his sons. Does it mark a coming together, a kind of return to the beginning, after the story of humanity scattering to the four winds?

But it was only recently—after looking closely at several of the paintings of the scene by some of the greatest painters—that I saw a bigger picture here. My favorite, for now, is Fra Angelico's *Adoration of the Magi*, from 1445. With its bright pastel colors and lavish gold, the painting includes Jesus in his mother's arms, Joseph hovering near, the kings, the observant ox and ass from Isaiah 1, the homely shoeing of the horses in the stable. But it also depicts crowds of people following in the train of the kings coming to worship. A whole stream is coming into town and being shown the way by residents of the city, and then a huge crowd to the left is processing up to the baby in all their finery.

Of course! That is what the story is about. All creation—even the stars and animals—knows this is a major event, and all come to worship. The idea that the message of the Epiphany is about mission and the universality of the gospel came as a shock to me, even after nearly 70 years of hearing it and reading it.

One of the wonderful things about scripture is that it never goes dry.