

O star of wonder, star of light. . . guide us to thy perfect light.

This Sunday, January 7th, CLC celebrates the Baptism of Jesus (Mark 4:1-11). Because of the quiriness of how Christmas (Dec 25th, a Monday) and Epiphany (January 6th, a Saturday) fall this season, we don't celebrate the first Sunday in January as Epiphany. I am sad—why? This meant that the beautiful adornment of our chancel, the creche, complete with wisemen, shepherds and the Holy Family, the vibrant Poinsettias and Chrismon trees ARE ALL GONE--Removed until Christmas Eve 2024. But, even though the Christmas season is over based on the liturgical calendar/lectionary, we are singing one last Christmas carol this Sunday—the carol most associated with the Feast of Epiphany—“***We Three Kings***”.

Usually we stand in our decorated sanctuaries to sing “*We Three Kings*,” noting those last to arrive to see the Christ Child. Here they come and not a moment too soon. It's almost time to take down the tree and decorations. The poinsettias may be wilting, yet here they come, over moor and mountain. It has been a difficult, dusty journey with nothing but a star, faith, and prophecy for guidance. Yet, they come, seeking the child. And they've brought gifts! We understand the gold. With actual gold, Joseph might have retired from carpentry or the hungry might have been fed. Most likely this gift of precious metal is symbolic, fit for the little Prince of Peace, the King of Kings. And we understand frankincense, the fragrant resinous dried sap harvested from *Boswellia sacra* trees and used since ancient times in religious ceremonies. We still use incense in some of our churches. Its smoke mingles with prayer and praise and lifts our earth-burdened thoughts to the heavens where the angels sing. But the myrrh! That's another story. What kind of gift is this for a baby? “Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom; sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.” Used for anointing the dead and embalming corpses, myrrh brings an image of death into the humble manger of our imaginations. We want to look away, tell the Magi to take it back, but we can't. We know the suffering that lies ahead for the holy child, “God and King and sacrifice.” Sacrifice! This carol, even with its glorious refrain about the star's royal beauty bright, won't let us forget it. We are tempted to lock baby Jesus away in his manger until next year so that we won't have to hear all that lies ahead—especially the brutality and gut-wrenching grief of Good Friday. But the kings have brought myrrh. We know what that means: Jesus has to grow up, and we have to let him.

In 1857, while teaching music at the General Theological Seminary in New York City, Rev. John Henry Hopkins, Jr. Pittsburgh-born son of an Episcopal bishop wrote the hymn, “*We Three Kings*” for a Christmas pageant that was presented at the Seminary that Christmas. He probably wrote the hymn with his nieces and nephews in mind. Since he traveled from New York to Vermont every Christmas, to spend the holidays with his family where his father was the longtime Episcopal Bishop for the State of Vermont., he always had a surprise for the youngsters at Christmas, and this year was no different. As usual, bachelor Uncle Henry did not disappoint the children. The family always had a dramatization of Matthew chapter 2, and the entire Christmas Story. The hymn was sung by the family for the next several years and was so popular with family and friends that by 1863 it had been published by Rev. Hopkins in his first collection of “Carols, Hymns, and Songs.”

As is typical of many carols, “*We Three Kings*” has a refrain (“Star of wonder, star of night ...” at the end of each verse). Distinct from most carols, the song begins in a minor key (usually E minor) and shifts to its relative major (G major) at the refrain. This harmonic shift is also matched by a shift in the lyrics. The verses focus on the kings' journey and the gifts they bring, and the refrain sings to the star, asking it to guide us to its perfect light. While the traditional number of magi is usually set at three, probably because of the three gifts that the biblical narrative discusses, it is unusual for Epiphany hymns to actually identify the number of magi as three. Stanzas two, three, and four describe in detail the symbolic nature of each of the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. From its inception, Hopkins encouraged the song's dramatic possibilities: Each of verses 2, 3, and 4, is sung as a solo [King Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar] with all voices joining in the refrain at the end of each verse. Only verses 1 and 5 are sung as a trio (by all three kings).

The imagery of the star is central to the Epiphany season and the narrative of the visit of the magi. The refrain focuses on the star and invites us to join the magi in following its light—“guide us to thy perfect light.” May each of us follow the Star of Bethlehem guiding us to the perfect light of Jesus Christ.

Sunday Worship Service with Holy Communion

10:00 AM