

**Christmas Grinch**  
Feast of Epiphany  
Matthew 2:1-12

**Slide: Grinch**

Who here has read the well known Dr. Seuss children's book *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas?* Whether or not you have read it, no doubt you have seen it, the Chuck Jones cartoon version with the scariest Boris Karloff as the Grinch. Or, perhaps you have seen director Ron Howard's version with Jim Carrey as the Grinch. Or the new cartoon with Benedict Cumberbatch. Either way, it is a treasured Dr. Seuss story.

You know the story as it happens in the town of Whoville. The Grinch hated seeing and hearing all the people of Whoville celebrating Christmas, and he tries to figure out a way to stop Christmas from coming. So, he thinks that if he steals all the presents, trees, decorations, and food associated with Christmas,

he will have stopped Christmas from coming.

Yet, it turns out that no matter how hard he tries, Christmas still comes and the people of Whoville still welcome it. The Grinch couldn't steal Christmas no matter how hard he tried, and tried he did indeed. In the end, it was the Grinch who changed, as his recognition that Christmas was something outside of himself and meaning more than himself, his heart grew and grew.

**Slide: Magi & Camels**

Well, in the Gospel reading you heard from Matthew, there is a Grinch in our story; one who definitely tries to stop Christmas from coming, but no matter how hard he tries, he cannot be successful. However, this Grinch never is changed from the fact that he has no control over Christmas. His frustration grows and grows and even in his death, his relentless need for power never

dissipates. Can you guess who that Grinch is?

Let's look at the whole cast of characters of this dramatic and amazing story from Matthew. First, we have Magi. Magi is a Greek word meaning wisdom, particularly referring to those in the ancient world who aspired to wisdom.

We often see the Magi at nativity scenes and at Christmas pageants, and yet, as you can tell from today's Gospel reading, these Wise Ones, the Magi, do not come to the stable. They come much later to the house of Mary and Joseph, as Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for some time after the birth of Jesus. Today, we lump the whole Christmas scene together including the three wise men, but they are completely different stories.

There is a funny Far Side cartoon that I posted on Face book this year about the three wise men. I'll read it for you:

**Slide: Far Side Cartoon**

**"Unbeknownst to most theologians, there was a fourth wise man, who was turned away from bringing fruitcake."**

**Slide: Magi traveling**

The thing is though; we cannot really know how many Magi were there. We assume three because there were three gifts, but there may have been more than three Magi to greet the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. What we do know is what kind of people the Magi were. They were people of science-astronomers, highly educated and wealthy, and they also were greatly respected in their culture, whether from Babylonia, modern day Iraq or perhaps even from Egypt. They were not from the Jewish faith at all and were the exact opposite of the poor lowly shepherds to whom the angels appeared. They were seekers of truth and of spirituality. They looked for God as a part of their study.

### **Slide: Herod the Great**

But, they were not the Grinch attempting to steal Christmas. Their motives of seeking out the Christ child were altruistic and like a quest for wisdom. No, the Grinch in this story is King Herod. Herod the Great reigned from 37 B.C.E. to 4 B.C.E. He was not a Jew but was appointed by the Roman Senate to represent them. He followed many of the Jewish laws and would often call in the Jewish religious leaders for advice or understanding, but I assure you, he would have been concerned about Jews and had great fears of their uprising against him.

Herod the Great was a ruthless leader, and he was so paranoid that he would be usurped, that he had his wife, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, and his brother-in-law all murdered. Therefore, it should be no surprise that when he heard of an infant who would be King that he would have no qualms in killing all the male children in Bethlehem

under the age of two, which he does. Mary, Joseph and Jesus get out of Bethlehem and flee as refugees to Egypt before Herod can get to them. It is interesting to note that Herod was a man of splendor, whose greatest achievement was the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem.

### **Slide: Magi and Herod**

In this Gospel account, we then see a juxtaposition of characters: The three Magi up and against King Herod. It seems at first that there can be no commonality between them. However, both the Wise Men and King Herod do have something in common. They both are seeking the Messiah.

Both are in a journey for the knowledge and knowing what God is up to. All these characters are seeking for the meaning in their own lives, for something to put their own lives into context. They were searching for more than what they had already,

and this desire was the motivation.

However, it is how the characters deal with this search for meaning and substance in life that gets at the heart of this Epiphany story. Herod believed that he himself was the focus point. He put himself and his own desires first. He looked out for number one, as sort of an everyman for himself. All of his focus was motivated by self-preservation at all costs, to remain as king and to kill anyone who threatens that. Everything was seen through the lens of his him and his own power.

**Slide: star of Bethlehem**

Yet, the Magi were seeking for meaning outside of themselves. They were actually seeking God, who was the true One for that meaning. Their lives had meaning in the pursuit of finding God in their lives...of experiencing the divine, of gaining true purpose.

Money was not an issue to them. Power was of no value. Position and title, though they did already have, seem of little consequence. It did enable them to make the journey, but it wasn't the reason for it. The Magi were seeking something that would help them to know the meaning of their lives, the meaning of life.

And, notice the results of the two main characters in this story. Herod, self-absorbed, was led to frustration, evil, and ultimately failure. On the other hand, the Magi, who were sincere in their seeking, were able to discover not only what they were looking for, but were no doubt changed by it.

And they had a star to guide them. Why, because they took the time to notice it. They paid attention to the sign before them, the star. They questioned their meaning in life and followed a star to find it...and find it they did.

**Slide: sand, camels, star**

How could we possibly apply this very dramatic story? Perhaps we ourselves are not the Magi. Hopefully, none of us are like Herod! But, like them both, we do have the light of Christ present in our lives, each and every day. Do we notice that light? Can we observe the metaphorical star God gives to point us to Christ? What is the symbolic star in your life that you need to follow where God is pointing? How is God calling you to find meaning? What is seizing your attention and making you wonder about how God seeks you as you think about seeking God? Has God used a situation in life, a tragedy, an illness, a crisis, a friend, or perhaps a book, an experience to start you on your way to meaning?

And, in that struggle to seek God's will, is it really your will you seek, your desire, your power and success that you really journey to, or are you seeking God's truth, God's

will, and God's way? Here we are encountering a brand new year - 2019. What new thing is God revealing to you as you begin?

**Slide: The wise still seek**

The Magi began a journey for truth and meaning. God led them on a journey with a star. Too, God has led you to this place today, this morning, on purpose. You are not here by accident or just because it's Sunday. You are here because God has you on a journey. God has purpose for you.

In this Epiphany story of Wise Men who travel from the East, these Magi not only follow a star, but they point the way for us. They teach us not to be self-absorbed and self-righteous, but to search for the One who can give our lives meaning and purpose, if we take the time to observe it.

You can choose to be the Grinch, in stealing Christmas for yourself, by using your ambition for only

yourself and ultimately  
being disappointed,  
frustrated, seeing threats  
everywhere around you. Or,  
you can follow Jesus, the  
little one who was born to  
give us meaning, whose  
birth was observed by the  
Magi and marked by a star.  
Today, let us all open our  
treasures to him and  
worship this, our newborn  
King and let the light of  
Christ point the way for you.  
Amen.