



## The Magus's Story



I'm old, and my eyes can no longer read the stars. There are holes in my cloak and my memories. But there are some things I will never forget. I'll always remember

that spectacular star. We hadn't seen one like it before—and we haven't seen one like it since. It was breathtaking, mesmerizing, and it compelled us to follow. We wanted to try to understand its meaning and the story it wished to share.

I'll always remember that long treacherous journey. There were 12 travellers in our caravan and 20 camels. Oh, the stink of the camels in the relentless heat! We carried hidden gifts with us in case we had to barter for a safe passage through a strange land.

I'll always remember the terror in Herod's eyes and the scribes' quivering voices when they were summoned before him. They spoke of an ancient prophecy—a star, a new king, a descendant of King David. Glad to put Jerusalem behind us, we followed the star to David's town of Bethlehem.

I'll always remember that little family and the peace that seemed to embrace them. Although they were living in an obscure hovel, it wasn't difficult to find them: we stuck out like a camel's hump in Bethlehem, and the people were eager to share the rumours with newcomers—tales told by shepherds who had been captivated by sights in the night sky and the news of a newborn king.

And I'll always remember that child. His family members were poor and vulnerable, yet so loving and gracious. We offered our gifts, hoping they would in some small way honour, protect, and bless the child. Watching him, we knew that we needn't search further or travel farther. The same compelling light that shone from the heavens shone in his eyes. That kind of light is unforgettable.

# Unwrapping the Magus's Story

Unravelling the message in the Magi's gifts.

## ACTIVITY 1: Special Gifts for Christmas

### Ages

All ages (especially Sunday school)

### Supplies

Copies of "The Gifts" (at right); paper and pens

### Activity

Read "The Gifts" and think about the people in your neighbourhood with whom you could share these gifts in a way that works for our times:

- gold: make a donation to a family in need or an organization that provides shelter for the homeless and assistance to the poor
- frankincense: using the paper and pens, compose a prayer for Christmas Eve or Epiphany naming the people or situations in our world that are close to your heart
- myrrh: visit those in your community who may be in hospital or at home facing serious illness

### The Gifts

We don't know how many magi followed the star, but we are told there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is a precious gift fit for a royal child. Frankincense is incense that symbolizes worship or prayer or divine presence. Myrrh is a healing balm or anointing oil that symbolizes Jesus' healing human presence. So each gift signifies a different name for the baby in the manger:

- gold for one who would be called "King"
- perfumed incense for one who would be worshipped as "Son of God"
- anointing myrrh for one who would be known as "the Anointed One" or "the Christ"

## ACTIVITY 2: Art Appreciation

### Ages

All ages (especially Sunday school and Messy Church)

### Supplies

Prints of different images of the Magi (include images from different cultures); access to the Web; art supplies for painting and/or sculpting; used greeting cards with images of the Magi; scissors, glue, and poster board for a collage

### Activity

Compare the various Magi images you have found. Then:

**a** Search online for images of the “Adoration of the Magi” and discover paintings by European masters, such as Botticelli, Da Vinci, De Bray, Durer, Giotto, and Rubens. Look carefully at these famous paintings and discuss the following questions.

- How would you describe each of the Magi? What are they doing in each painting and how do their appearances (nationality, expressions, clothing, head covering, stances) differ from one painting to the next?
- How is the Christ child portrayed in each painting? What is he doing?
- How many other characters are included in each painting? Can you identify them? What are their facial expressions? What do you think they are feeling or thinking?
- What symbols do you notice in each painting (e.g. lily, lamb, chalice, star)?

**b** On the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops website (<http://www.cccb.ca/site/eng/component/content/article/257-indigenous-peoples/3200-ccb-art-collection>), find the picture “Nativity” by Jackson Beardy (Cree, 1944-, Winnipeg, Manitoba). Before you read the artist's comments on this site, take time to look carefully at Beardy's painting and talk about what you see. For instance, notice that wise animals take the place of the Magi.

**c** Invite each person to draw, paint, or sculpt a Nativity scene and to include the Magi. Invite them to include themselves in their scenes. Ask:

- Where are you standing in the story?
- What are you doing in your picture: praying, offering a gift, singing a lullaby?
- How will you depict the Christ child?
- What expressions will you draw on the faces of the other characters?

Share pictures of your artwork on social media using hashtags #UCCan #AdventUnwrapped.

**d** Working in small groups, cut and paste your favourite images of the Magi from the greeting cards. Create a collage to share.

- What catches your attention in these pictures and why?

### ACTIVITY 3: Stargazing

#### Ages

All ages (try this at home)

#### Supplies

A smartphone or app with SkyView® installed (this activity is best done in the evening)

#### Discuss

Talk about the star in the Christmas story. Was it a supernova? A comet? A conjunction of planets? Uninterested in natural causes, Matthew points to a supernatural event! He is recalling a prophecy from centuries past: “The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of the man whose eye is clear, the oracle of one who hears the words of God.... I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near—a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:15–17). The star guides us all to the one who would be called “the bright morning star” (Revelation 22:16) and “light of the world” (John 9:5).

#### Activity

Find the stars!

- a** SkyView® Free brings stargazing to everyone! Download the app and then point your handheld device at the sky to identify stars, constellations, satellites, the space station, and more!
- b** Spend some time wondering and enjoying the stars! Or have a scavenger hunt for constellations.
- c** Invite a local astronomer or star watcher to share their telescope and the story of the stars with you. Plan an excursion to a planetarium or science centre.

**ACTIVITY 4: Storytime****Ages**

All ages

**Supplies**

Storybooks about the Magi and/or story videos.

**Activity**

**a** Read together a storybook that focuses on the Magi, e.g.:

- *The Last Straw* by Fredrick H. Thury.  
This is the story of the Magi from the camel's point of view! Hoshmakaka, a curmudgeonly old camel, has been chosen for the great responsibility of carrying gifts to the new baby king. Every day in the heat crossing the desert, his pack grows heavier as the crowds of people give him their gifts to carry. Oh, his gout! Oh, his sciatica!

- NOTE: This story easily translates into an all-ages pageant. Also, *The Last Straw* is included in a CBC recording titled *Along the Road to Bethlehem* that includes performances by the Toronto Children's Chorus and tenor Ben Heppner as Hoshmakaka the camel.
- *The Gift of the Magi* by O. Henry. A short story about a young married couple and how they deal with the challenge of buying Christmas gifts for each other with very little money.

**b** Watch "Wisemen" (<https://youtu.be/mxgmC-doiS8>). Storyteller Garrison Keillor tells his own version of the story of the Magi and explains the real meaning of myrrh!

**Robyn Brown-Hewitt**, Instructor, Supervised Ministry Practicum at Atlantic School of Theology and United Church Chaplain at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Please remember to credit the author and The United Church of Canada when reproducing these materials.