Magi came to Jesus Christ and worshipped him. Magi came to him from the East.«

Jesus Christ first appeared in history in Bethlehem, which – seen from Rome as the center of the empire – was in a marginal space. There began his compassion for the marginalised and oppressed people, bringing them peace of the Kingdom of God as life in fullness.

We should note the historical importance of the fact that these wise men went on a pilgrimage to Jesus from the East. In the Hebrew Bible the »eastern world« meant the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Empires. They were oppressors who brought suffering to Israel and were hostile to the Israelites. It is a symbol of reconciliation that the magi came to Jesus from the East and worshipped him. It symbolically implies reconciliation. Jesus Christ is the Lord of reconciliation.

Rev. Dr. Sungjae Kim,
General Secretary of the National Christian Council in Japan
The Visit of the Wise Men

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,

asking, »Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.«

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;

and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, »In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

›And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.«

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.

Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, »Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.«

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1–12 (NRSV)
The Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe (1913–1996) is one of the best-known representatives of his artistic school in Japan and probably the country’s best known Christian artist. His trademark are stencil prints based on Bible stories, depicted in an unmistakable style.

Watanabe was born in 1913; his father, a Christian, died when Sadao was ten years old. After long reflection, and an initial aversion, he was baptised at the age of 27 in the United Church of Christ. During his time of study he turned to folk art (Mingei), a style which pursued throughout his whole creative period.

From 1953 until his death, Watanabe and his wife lived in the district of Takadanobaba in Tokyo, and he became an active member of the Mejiro-church there. Due to the early death of his father he had to leave school in the 8th grade. While working in a dyeworks in his twenties he founded the »Society of Green Leaves« (Moegikai).

From 1941 he was strongly influenced by the artist Keisuke Serizawa, who introduced him to Mingei art (the »arts of the people«) which was centred around the Nihon Mingeikan (Japan Folk Crafts Museum) in Tokyo. The Mingei Movement fostered art that cannot be classed as either classical or modern in terms of its traditions and techniques and was done in traditional handicraft and domestic production. Arising towards the end of the 19th century, it made use of rural skills such as weaving, pottery and carving.

The central figure of the Japanese Mingei movement was Muneyoshi (Sōetsu) Yanagi, who also founded the Mingeikan Museum. Serizawa, Watanabe’s teacher, had specialised in stencil making and printing. He had mastered the art of stencil colour print on the Ryukyu Islands, an island group between Japan and Taiwan, which also includes Okinawa. Watanabe’s stencil printing technique was basically a continuation and further development of Serizawa’s technique.

From the 1940s onwards Watanabe devoted himself – also under Serizawa’s influence – to biblical themes by means of woodblock printing, etching and batik, which traditionally used linen and paper on the Okinawa Islands. He later used handmade paper from Northern Japan made from the inner bark of SADAO WATANABE’S »THE THREE WISE MEN« (1972)

Encountering Christ changes us and does not remain without consequences. We are also changed by encountering the least of his brothers and sisters, the marginalized, the excluded, the small ones, the discriminated.

Buraku in Japan, Dalit in India, Sinti and Roma in Germany – they have changed us too. And allowed us to seek and take new paths, with empathy and solidarity at their side. Walking together for a while has also changed our way of going forward and taught us to see Christ anew.

Carola Hoffmann-Richter,
German East Asia Mission board member
the mulberry tree. Watanabe received numerous prizes for his art, including the Mingeikan Award and the National Art Prize. He was also considerably influenced by the woodblock printing artist Shiko Munakata (1903–1975) who usually devoted himself to Buddhist themes, but also created pictures with Christian motifs. Watanabe’s works are still very present in the annual calendar sheets regularly published by Shinkyo Shuppansha (Protestant Publisher, Tokyo). The World Council of Churches in Geneva also used his services: in 1991 he designed a picture for the programme cover for the WCC Assembly in Canberra.

Watanabe devoted his artistic work exclusively to biblical motifs and themes. Modified very little over the decades, his distinctive style makes his works recognisable at a glance: body posture and facial expression follow the same alignment throughout the pictures and, through their straight or oblique attitude, point to the centre of the picture. The faces are dominated by the T formed by the eyes and nose line, in some cases more differentiated in semi-profile, with the mouth usually a horizontal line drawn through the long vertical line leading down from the nose.

Numerous works depict an uneven number of figures, whose faces or postures point from both sides towards the centre of the picture – in the case of The Three Wise Men, two from the left and one from the right. Likewise, the curved bodies of the figures underline the orientation towards the centre.

Each picture represents its own, self-contained graphic order. This distinguishes Watanabe’s pictures from those that seem like an excerpt of a greater whole, like many landscapes in the Japanese wood-printing tradition of the 19th century.

The picture »The Three Wise Men«, as with many of Watanabe’s artworks, embeds a biblical motif in a Japanese context. According to the artist, it shows The Three Wise Men on their way home. This picture too is a small, closed cosmos, in which The Three Wise Men and the boat – including the waves – form the closed rectangle. This may recall the closed appearance of a Sino-Japanese character that is always drawn into a square. Here, too, the composition is made of three close-up figures turning towards the centre, one from one direction and two from the other. Yet in a boat people normally all look ahead!

Today, with the Internet, you believe you have access to any information you need, election results, soccer league scores, and the best sushi restaurant in your town..., etc. But someone has disclosed the information so that we can know and see it.

God showed us his love by sending Jesus Christ, so now we can see his great mercy and love for us. As the ones who already know Him, how can we share his love with others in a way they can see God’s love and mercy in their society and culture? I like to share this challenge with my brothers and sisters in EMS network in the day of Epiphany.

Koichi Kaneko,
Christian East Asia Mission Japan
Yet the direction is quite clear from their body language: all three are turning to the right but the man in front looks ‘back’ over his shoulder. They are standing so closely together that the middle one looks a bit pressed by the other two, to judge by his facial expression.

What brings The Three Wise Men onto a ship, which the Bible does not mention at all? In an anecdote, Watanabe enjoyed to tell, he pointed out that they went home »another way«, because they had been warned about Herod. The other way could also have been by sea. Or another thought: to judge by the curved shape and the flower symbols, the picture depicts a Japanese boat. For ancient Japanese it would have been natural for visitors from abroad to come across the sea by boat.

The Three Wise Men row themselves with oars that unobtrusively blend into the picture – they are black like the edge of the boat and the sea, and almost seem part of the ship design. The fact that the boat is small and they row themselves indicates a private and urgent action. As with his pictures of the Last Supper with fish and rice wine on the table, this is also a case of Japanese contextualisation, which is typical of many of Watanabe’s pictures.

The typical Watanabe faces of The Three Wise Men look recognizably serious and worried, which all the more points to them hastening home after being warned about Herod. It seems to me that their faces express the fear of the threat Herod and others pose to Jesus – so soon after his birth. I also see in the close nestled bodies a way of seeking protection from this threat.

Ulrich Dehn

With the arrival of the three Magi at Jesus’ crib, the divide between Jews and non-Jews is bridged. It is revealed: God is not the property of a race or a nation, nor of a sex or class or institution. We all belong to God. In the light of this Epiphany we are called to bridge all divides that obscure and obstruct this good news – our one-ness in God’s love.

Fear, prejudice and hatred in our hearts blind us to this truth. Discrimination in our words, customs and institutions block our advance into God’s peace. There are many bridges to be laid in a diverse world. Lord, thank you for our sisters and brothers in every land, and for making us one in the mission of Your universal love.

David McIntosh, co-director of the ecumenical initiative Center for Minority Issues and Mission in Tokyo
IN A BOAT WITH THE WISE MEN

AN ARTWORK FROM JAPAN

IDEAS FOR THE CHILDREN’S SERVICE
AT EPIPHANY
EMSO AND THE THREE WISE MEN

The children sit around a map of the world. Emso, the elephant, reports of his encounter with the picture by Sadao Watanabe.

Hello! And thanks for letting me come to your Children’s Service today. My name is Emso. Can you guess what I am?

Right, an elephant! I love travelling and meeting lots of people. I am particularly interested in their faith and special days. There are many special days in the church year and they all have their own meaning. Today we are celebrating Epiphany.

This is a day I know very well. In the beginning, I could not even pronounce it. Epiph... was all that I could remember. But know I know how to say it: E-PIPH-A-NY. Say it after me, altogether now…

Epiphany means the festival of manifestation. We celebrate three different events at once, which are all supposed to have happened on a 6th of January: the arrival of the Wise Men from the East in Bethlehem, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’s first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Today I am going to tell you about my meeting with the Wise Men.

Just imagine, I was on one of the beautiful Japanese islands in East Asia. Look on the map to find Japan… That is where I saw the Wise Men. Not in real life, but on a print by the Japanese artist Sadao Watanabe. The picture he painted about Epiphany is fascinating. Let’s have a look at it together.Oops! Where have I put it? Sometimes I am a bit careless. Will you help me to find it?

INFO ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sadao Watanabe (1913-1996) was a Japanese artist and is probably the most well-known Christian artist in the country. His trademark is stencil images based on Bible stories, often embedded in the Japanese context. His art is shaped by Japanese folk art (Mingei), which is based on traditional domestic crafts. His pictures are in demand the world over and have been awarded national prizes.

MATERIALS FOR THE CHILDREN’S SERVICE

- Take the poster with the Epiphany picture from Japan out of the booklet
- Portray Emso, the elephant, creatively, possibly using the copy template
- Pencils
- Paper

COPY TEMPLATE

Ready-to-print copy template at: www.ems-friends.org
The children look for the hidden picture and place it in the middle. Now everyone looks at the picture together. The following questions and theological suggestions can be used individually for the group.

EVERYONE LOOKS AT THE PICTURE

THEOLOGICAL INPUT
TWO RESOURCES FOR GROUP LEADERS

1. The picture shows Epiphany in the Japanese context. Japan is an island nation and the sea its natural border. In the Bible the Three Wise Men cross the desert to visit the baby Jesus. They bring Jesus valuable presents and go home still more enriched. Filled with joy at the birth of Jesus, they master the challenges and overcome borders such as deserts and seas. Children all over the world live with different borders. The journey of the Wise Men tells us about the hope that these borders can be overcome – all of them, each in their own context.

2. Matthew 2:12 reads, »And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another way.« (The whole story of the Wise Men is found in Matthew 2:1-12)

Artist Watanabe said himself that the picture is about this particular passage from Matthew. We see the Wise Men returning home, just as Watanabe placed them in his Japanese context. Overwhelmed with joy at the birth of Jesus, they are deliberately taking another way home, by sea. They wear colourful clothes, the background is very red and the boat is decorated with flowers. All three of them are rowing and they seem to be very close up to one another. The experience at Jesus’ crib goes with them and sustains them on their way.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

What can you see on the picture?

What colours can you discover in the picture?

What effect do the colours have on you?

What pattern do the clothes and the boat have?

What effect do the faces have on you?

How much room is there in the boat?

What other stories from the Bible do you know in which water and boats play a role?

And this is an interesting point: Here, the Wise Men are travelling in a boat on the water. How is that portrayed in your country?

Do they also travel on the water?

AN IDEA FOR A DRAWING

What route would the Wise Men follow to come to your Children’s Service?

What form of transport would they take?

Draw a picture!
PROPOSED SONGS

- We Three Kings of Orient Are
- He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands
- Jesus, where can we find you
  (Thuma Mina 217)

PRAYER

Merciful God,
thank you for the festival of Christmas,
thank you that we were able to celebrate
the birth of Jesus.
Now Christmas is over. But let us not lose the joy
about Jesus. The Wise Men are going home, too.
You are with them on the water.
Even if some ways of travel scare us:
You are always with us, whether in a bus
or on foot or on the water.
Protect all those who have to take dangerous routes.
You are with us in the New Year. Thank you for that.
Amen.

Idea and text: Jerry Jeongdo An, Ulrich Dehn,
Franka Hessel, Gabriele Mayer and Annette Schumm
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YOU + ME: FRIENDS AROUND THE WORLD
is an educational programme for
Children’s Service and primary school.
Children get to know each other worldwide:
at eye-level, ecumenically and open for
commonalities and differences.

More information at www.ems-friends.org/en
CHRISTIANS IN JAPAN

Christianity in Japan is only a small religious community, if one compares the numbers with those of the members of e.g. Buddhist temples. Besides Buddhism, Japan is also strongly influenced culturally and religiously by Shintō, which focuses on the worship of local powers, the kami, and praying to them for happiness, success, health, and love. Basically, a separation between Buddhism and Shintō is a relatively new phenomenon. While the Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines are institutionally separate today, there are traces of mutual influence and overlaps. The concept of ‘religion’ is foreign to many Japanese or even has a negative connotation. People do not necessarily see themselves as religious – even if they are buried according to a Buddhist rite and take part in Shintō festivals.

Christianity has been introduced to Japan in the 16th century by Portuguese Jesuits. Franz Xavier was the first missionary to tread Japanese soil. After initial successes, but also misunderstandings due to translation problems, Christianity was first received kindly but finally banned and, in some cases, fiercely persecuted. One of the main reasons for this was the suspicion that the missionaries were only heralds of colonisation. Impressions of the dramatic impacts of persecution on the lives of the believers were taken up in the novels of the author Shusako Endo (1923 – 1996).

In 2018, some of the sites associated with ‘hidden Christians’ (kakure kirishitan) during the time of persecution were declared World Heritage Sites. After Christians who held to their faith undeterred could only live their faith underground, Christianity again became a recognised religion when Japan opened up in the middle of the 19th century.

Protestant mission began in Japan in the second half of the 19th century by American and European missionaries. The first Protestant church was founded in Yokohama in 1872. In the early 1940s, new religious laws obliged all registered Protestant churches to join in one church. However, since 1946 several denominations, including the Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church, have left the United Church of Christ in Japan (nihonkirisutokyodan – KYODAN).

With approx. 196,000 members, today the KYODAN is the largest Protestant church in Japan. Important areas of its activity, besides evangelisation, are advocating for peaceful coexistence not only within Japan but also in East Asia, standing up for the rights of minorities, and opposing militarisation. The ageing of society poses a great challenge for the churches. Overall, Christians make up only about one percent of the population. Yet with their private schools, private universities, hospitals, kindergartens, and social work, they play an active part in society and have an impact on the general public.

Ferdinand Liefert

Three men rowing a boat.
They are all helping to row. The first turns around and seems to be communicating with the second one, while the third man looks straight ahead. He seems to see or suspect something that escapes the others. What are his eyes focusing on, what do the three men expect as the goal of their journey – and will their expectations be fulfilled?”

Ferdinand Liefert, theologian, participant in the Interreligious Study Programme (ISJP) in Kyoto, Japan (see page 15)
BOAT-MESSAGE

three in a boat
they have a message
and are themselves
the message
they stand up for it
closely together
upright
as in a nutshell
even if the world
under them
shakes
they remain upright
so it appears

the message is clear
the light of the world
has
glimpsed
the light of the world
there
where it all overlaps
heaven and earth
a cold night and warm nest
stones and straw
darkness and light
animals and humans
angels and shepherds
above and below
abroad and at home
flight and refuge
arriving and departing

there
where everything
comes together
there is space
space
for christmas
there lies the child
in the manger
in our midst
it could not be closer

a light in the darkness
a child in a stable
from here
the new dawn
morning is breaking
great hopes
great awakenings
the future
of those pushed to the
margins
is no longer short now
because god comes down
and becomes a child
the almighty
the descending god
shows godself
vulnerable
very close in the child
that is new

and when we see a child
today
even today
then we caught god
in the act
wise
magi
kings
save the message
out into the world
become refugees

here they choose
the way across the water
the water
once again
living water
as in the chalice
brimming with hope

hope
that ripples
and holds
to this day
still and forever
the boat
the message
the boat-message is
on the way

Carsten Rostalsky
In the Orient it was usual to travel on camels. Watanabe set The Three Wise Men in a Japanese context – they are travelling by boat. The artist transferred the biblical story into Japanese faith experience and tradition.

For me, this painting by Watanabe reflects three strong messages: the fact that The Three Wise Men are portrayed in a boat reminds us that Japan consists of many islands. But the painting also relates to Jesus: He had many meetings with people in boats.

Secondly, the picture highlights the great distance that The Three Wise Men had to cover. The Japanese understood that every long journey took place in boats. Watanabe portrays the wise men as a team that concentrates on its task. With the help of the star they calculate the right direction to reach their goal: meeting God’s child.

And the third aspect: In Japanese culture, traditional life is strongly organised in community and family groups. They draw strength from the bond of people standing closely together – as depicted in the picture.

Solomon Paul Benjamin, 
EMS Liaison Secretary for East Asia and India
A highly modern society, deeply rooted in its traditions – that is present-day Japan. The approx. 126 million inhabitants – almost 99 percent of them Japanese – live on more than 6,800 islands. Koreans, Chinese, Filipinos and Taiwanese are in the minority. The Buraku are ethnic Japanese, whose ancestors were considered to be in impure professions, according to the Shinto view. Still today they are socially excluded. Modern-day problems of the country are the ageing of society and high youth unemployment.

Almost one hundred years – until the first half of the 17th century – Japan traded with Europeans, but afterwards largely isolated itself until the middle of the 19th century. In the run-up to the Second World War, the country pursued an aggressive expansion policy towards China and for a short time ruled large parts of Southeast and East Asia. Japan entered the Second World War in 1941 with the attack on Pearl Harbour. After the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Japan finally capitulated unconditionally.

Current affairs that strongly preoccupy the members of the United Church of Christ in Japan, too, are the political and social handling of the legacy of the Second World War and of nuclear energy.

PEACE CONSTITUTION: In Article 9 of the Japanese constitution, the people of Japan commit themselves to refrain from warring activities and their own armed forces for all time. The right-wing conservative government under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is attempting to abolish Article 9. The Japanese are deeply divided on the question of revising the constitution.

COMFORT WOMEN: At least 200,000 so-called »Comfort Woman«, most of them from Korea and China, were forced into prostitution during the Second World War in military brothels. For a long time, none of the women dared to break the silence – for fear of social disapproval. It was not until 1991 that those concerned spoke up and demanded an official apology from Japan, and recognition of what had happened – to this day, their calls have been in vain.

TRIPLE DISASTER: On 11 March 2011, a seacocke took place about 160 kilometres northeast of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station and caused a Tsunami, which led to the melt-down of three reactors. The death toll of quake and tsunami was about 20,000, another approx. 2,500 people are still missing. 470,000 people were temporarily living in emergency shelters – some of them to this day. After the death of a former power plant worker in September 2018, Japan’s government admitted for the first time that there was a connection with the nuclear disaster.

Regina Karasch-Böttcher

STUDYING IN JAPAN
The EMS offers a study visit in Japan. At the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions, students can learn about interreligious and cross-cultural dialogue in Japan. The English-speaking study programme lasts four to six months.
OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION – THE BURAKU LIBERATION CENTRE
COLLECTION RECOMMENDATION

Time and again, the Buraku – a Japanese minority – suffer discrimination in society. They are declared equal under the law since 1871, but the reality is different. Why are these Japanese people excluded? Their forefathers exercised professions, which society regarded as impure. They were butchers, tanners or undertakers. A father passed his job onto his son. The Buraku were settled in their own districts and their children were not allowed to attend normal schools. Like the Dalit in India, that are outside the caste system, or like the Sinti and Roma in Germany, they are still disadvantaged when looking for housing and work, and most of them experience social discrimination.

Rev. Kazuhiro Tanimoto of the United Church of Christ in Japan himself is a Buraku and reports from his experience: »Even as a small child I heard from other people that I was trash.« He co-founded the church-related Buraku Liberation Centre in Osaka, which stands up against all forms of discrimination in Japan and also supports many international initiatives against discrimination. The centre issues publications, raises the issues in theater plays and invites the public to information events all over the country.

Its aim is to heighten awareness of this injustice in Japanese society and stop discrimination. The centre works internationally with Dalit empowerment groups in India and Sinti and Roma associations in Germany. With your donation you will help the United Church of Christ to continue its struggle against discrimination.

Reference: Buraku Centre
Donation account: Evangelische Bank eG
IBAN: DE85 5206 0410 0000 0001 24
BIC: GENODEF1EK1