



THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

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(Epiphany Sunday – New Year’s Day)



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**Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6;
Luke 2:22-40; Matthew 2:1-12**

Isaiah 60:1-6

¹Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.²For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.³Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.⁴Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.⁵Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Luke 2:22-40

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Matthew 2:1-12

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “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.”³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:⁶‘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.’”⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.⁸Then 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.”

⁹When 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.¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.¹¹On 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.¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Message: Epiphany

The church calendar also calls us to celebrate The Epiphany of The Lord this morning...Technically that day is January 6, but the church celebrates it on the Sunday before. The Season of Christmastide is not yet over, but the days are growing short.

It is a good time to focus our attention on these words from the Nicene Creed (Hymnal #880): “For us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” For us men, He became man. For all of humanity, God the Son...the eternal Word, the Light and Life...became a human being...to show us how to live and how to love.

The word epiphany can be a little confusing, but it simply means appearing or manifestation. In its generic sense what happens when we are reading a difficult book and come across one sentence that makes everything clear. We have a “aha” moment...an epiphany. Our Eastern Orthodox friends celebrate Epiphany as the Baptism of our Lord, because it was at His Baptism that Jesus made His first public appearance as the Son of God. We celebrate Jesus’ baptism next Sunday. Today, we celebrate the epiphany of the magi as they traveled from far away eastern lands to worship Jesus and to present their gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Our translation says they followed a star. A more faithful translation

simply says that they had seen his rising. In any event, something important became clear to them...they had an epiphany.

And so, we celebrate Epiphany as the day when Christ was revealed to the Gentiles. The magi were the first Gentile worshippers of the Messiah. Matthew uses a story including Gentiles to prove to his Jewish audience that the scriptures...specifically Micah...are fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. You might have expected Luke to have told about gentile worshippers...but of course Luke probably wouldn't have used wealthy people as his examples. But it is Matthew who writes of the magi from afar...there is no talk of shepherds...only these magi from Persia...probably Babylon (Iraq today). They were about as uncircumcised, non-Israelite...Gentile as you could get. Nevertheless, they came to worship the Child and acknowledge Him as King. Since most of us don't have a drop of Jewish blood in us, this is a big day for us too. The Baby born to Mary is the world's baby, and today the world still seeks wise men to worship Him.

Our first Gospel lesson contains a sort of epiphany as well. The parents of Jesus follow the Jewish tradition and take him to Jerusalem. And there they encounter Simeon who makes some rather grand claims about this child...and then blesses the totally amazed parents. Simeon, a man of both age and great faith had an "aha" moment. So did the young parents, Mary and Joseph, "who were amazed at what was being said about Him".

Having an epiphany is a nice feeling and these are wonderful stories. The one in Matthew is where we get the fun stuff of Christmas - the star on the Christmas tree, all those Christmas lights, and the whole notion of giving gifts. Matthew tells about the magi to remind his Jewish readers that Israel's Messiah came for all and not for a chosen few. "For us men and for our salvation," as we say.

There have been many scholarly attempts to explain the mysterious "appearing" in the sky over Bethlehem, but in the end it remains a mystery. It is mystery to us, just as it would have been a mystery to the magi - the wise men. They saw whatever they saw and concluded based on their reading that a great King had been born. So they got their gifts together, packed their provisions, and set out on the dangerous journey across the desert. And now is just as good a time as any to say that we don't really know how many of the "kings" there were. The Gospel talks of three gifts, but it doesn't tell how many travelers there were. And of course, their first stop was Jerusalem. If a king of the Jews had been born, it makes sense to check in at King Herod's palace in Jerusalem.

Well, there weren't any baby boys bouncing around the Herod household that year; which was probably good, since Herod later murdered his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle, and anyone else who he saw as a threat to his throne. So you can imagine that this bunch of Babylonians looking for a newly born "King of Jews" would get Herod's attention. After all, we know he was paranoid. He called in

the teachers of the Torah and asked them where the Messiah was supposed to be born. And they studied until they found words from the prophet Micah who, seven hundred years before had written,”

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ~Micah 5:2 (New Revised Standard Version)

So off to Bethlehem the magi go, following that “appearing” we call a star. They find the child, fall to their knees and worship him. This is no small thing...Men whose forefathers once took David’s children captive into Babylon with the sword, now come bearing gifts, to worship a baby of David’s lineage. The one who *“For us men and for our salvation...came down...was incarnate...and was made man.”*

The Mystery is revealed to us...This Mystery that through the good news of Jesus, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel in the one body of Christ. God has brought all things together under one Head. We have gotten used to that concept...But on this original day of Epiphany the concept that a Messiah might belong to anyone not of the House of Israel was entirely foreign. This is a radical departure from previous understanding.

Does this have any special meaning for us, today? What can it mean? Well, first it means that God made it clear that He dwelled among us for everyone. Not just for Jews, but for everyone. Now that is Mad, Crazy, Love, and for us it means this: Not just for us, but for everyone! Jesus doesn’t belong to any one nation, any one group, or any one person. God doesn’t play favorites. That means we need to be especially careful about how we interact with others...for they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Even if they don’t know it, we do. And we are obligated to act accordingly. It really is important to love our neighbors.

The gifts of the wise men remind us of who this Child of Bethlehem is and what He will do. I doubt the Magi understood the meaning of their gifts. They were probably bringing the most expensive, portable gifts they could - gold, incense, myrrh. But, in fact each gift says something important about Jesus.

Gold is the gift of royalty. This King from is the Ruler of the universe, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords.

Incense is the gift for a god. This little Child is Son of God, Light of Light, and true God of true God.

Myrrh is the gift of suffering and death. It was used in medicine and for burying the dead. This Child came to suffer, to die, to rise, “for us men, for the whole human race, and for our salvation.”

The wise men brought exactly the right things for one who would demonstrate his total love in his life, his death, and his resurrection.

So, Epiphany reminds each of us how privileged we are as believers. We too have been guided to the place where we can worship our Savior. We weren't guided by a star in the sky. More likely, it was by the word of a parent, or a coworker, or friend. And we didn't have to go on a 700 mile journey through the desert. We simply had to get out of bed and come to a meeting place where the Word is preached and Communion is shared.

So, for us, this place is our Bethlehem, where Jesus greets us personally. We didn't have to ride a camel across the desert to worship. We didn't need a star to guide us. We've come to Bethlehem this morning, where God's Son Jesus who is Lord and Christ and Savior is here to receive us, to forgive us, to accept and feed us, and to send us out as lights into this dark world He died to save. The Eucharist is his gift to us today...his presence for us...O come, let us adore Him.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,

Amen!