

HAPPY NEW YEAR

Today we are gathered to celebrate the Eucharist and to participate in recognizing the Epiphany of the Lord. In preparing for this homily, I was stuck by how little I actually knew about the Epiphany. Like so many topics related to our faith, I had heard about the Epiphany all my life, but never realized exactly what it meant or the history surrounding its liturgical formation.

By word definition, the term Epiphany means appearance or manifestation. Celebrated first by the Eastern Church on the 6th of January, the day was set aside to commemorate the manifestation of the Lord. To the early church, the fact that God would become a man was really a big deal; it was a big deal because it never happened before that mankind could actually know God personally and enjoy His company. In the world of the early church, the culture promoted gods everywhere, even the emperor was a deity. In today's modern- postmodern culture there seems to be a concerted effort to eliminate the presence of God.

Over time this special day became the subject of much historical investigation and it has been severely scrutinized with no little questioning concerning its origin, meaning, and purpose. The Protestant segment of the church, especially the "free evangelical churches" have pretty much abandoned the use of the term and liturgical practice while the Catholic, Orthodox, and Oriental jurisdictions, depending on their culture and ethnic backgrounds,

have developed various myths, traditions and approaches concerning its celebration.

For example, how many Magi traveled from the East to Bethlehem to worship the newborn baby Jesus? What were their names? Did their gifts actually have a specified meaning? The Scripture gives no exact number of Magi nor does it mention any particular names for the traveling astrologers or hidden meanings to their gifts. Numbers, names, and particulars to the chronicle have been redacted as a result of the processes of story telling. Does that mean that the story is not true or relevant? No, not at all. This type of story and the Jewish haggadic style in which it was written addresses more the overall principle of the story as compared to highlighting the particular historical accuracies concerning the event.

Incidentally, Haggadahs are Jewish parables, maxims, or anecdotes in rabbinical literature serving either to illustrate the meaning or purpose of the law, custom, or Biblical passage being discussed. In fact, Jesus was a master in using this form of communication to introduce topics of concern to his audiences.

Today's OT reading in Isaiah mentions that caravans of camels shall fill you, dromedaries from Midian and Ephah, all from Sheba shall come bearing gold and frankincense. The Gospel of Matthew includes myrrh as another gift presented, indeed quite possibly the source for the speculated number of three Magi visiting the baby king. As a side note, some people have supposed that the wise men traveled from the distant Far East. The fact that Scripture mentions dromedaries, the single humped camels found in Arabia, India, and Northern Africa vs.

the Bactrian camels with two humps found in China and Asia lends support to the notion of the Magi coming from the region of the Midianites.

Some may ask, where or what is Midian? Is Midian a geographical place or a people group? Mentioned both in the Bible and in the Qur'an, Midian is believed to be in northwest Arabia on the east shore of the Gulf of Aqaba and the Northern Red Sea. However, on the other hand, some scholars believe that Midian was not so much a place as it was a people group; as such, Ephah being one of the five sons of Midian.

Concerning Sheba, much debate ensues as to its exact location. The legendary Queen of Sheba and her visit to King Solomon has also been the topic of much historical question and certainly a prime source for much folklore and indeed even a movie or two. The majority of scholars today place Sheba near modern Yemen and/or Ethiopia. Again, the exact location is probably not as important as the fact that these astrologically God fearing seekers were Gentiles, they were seekers who were searching for God while the Jewish leaders of the day were busy searching for ways to maintain power and control.

The fact that the Magi are Gentiles gives a significant meaning to the celebration of the Epiphany. God chose to reveal the light of the world to everyone who would long for His appearing. These Magi represent us Gentile people, the people who as a result of St. Paul's missionary journeys would someday be included as members of the Body of Christ. "He came to His own but His own received Him not" (John 1:11).

So how are we to understand this holy day and to what significance shall we assign it? As mentioned earlier, segments of the early Church selected January 6th to celebrate the baptism of the Lord, only later incorporating the same day to celebrate the Nativity of the Lord and His first miracle at Cana. Today many Eastern Orthodox Churches rank the Epiphany as the third most important holy day of the year following Easter and Pentecost.

January 6 in the West was also known as mini-Christmas and it focused on the visitation of the Magi, and in some regions, His first miracle at Cana. The Sunday following the Epiphany was then reserved to celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. In fact many pious Christians consider the Season of Epiphany to stretch from January 6th to the day before Ash Wednesday, thus a method of marking the special events in the life of Christ as He slowly made His way from Galilee to Jerusalem and His impending death on the cross.

Historically, the Western church selected December 25th to celebrate Jesus' birth. Throughout the Roman Empire the 25th of December was already being celebrated as the birthday of the Sun and so the early Christian leaders used the festival as a way to evangelize the then known world.

Reinterpreting an existing celebration with new information and emphasizing the fact that the Son of God was born to save mankind from the darkness of sin proved to be a wise decision. In truth, the early church did not do anything wrong as many modern-day anti-Catholic skeptics have accused them.

In reality what the Early Church did was to bring clarification to events and spiritual mysteries intuitively known and already being described by inaccurate myths, legends, and hero-type demy-gods. When the correct information was supplied about our loving God, the people readily accepted it and many were converted to Christ where they continued to learn more about their newfound Savior and the cost of discipleship.

So in today's Mass what are we really celebrating, His birth, His baptism, the visitation of the Magi, or the miracle at Cana? Which event is the reason for the season? The answer, none of them individually, yet all of them collectively, in essence we do not celebrate a particular day or event; instead, we celebrate the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world, Jesus born in the flesh, a light in a dark and sinful habitat.

The genealogy and the manifestation of Jesus Christ in the flesh marks the starting point for St. Matthew as he presents his story of salvation. We will spend the most amount of time in the Gospel of Mathew this year. In the New Testament Commentary: Matthew, biblical scholar William Hendrickson writes, "the Gospel of Matthew has been called the most important book of the world," and then citing Goodspeed, he states that Matthew is, "the most successful book ever written."

We don't actually need the testimony of scholars to convince us of the importance of the Book of Matthew. Reading the narrative for ourselves will convince us of this fact. However, what we will get from scholarship is a clearer and more accurate picture of the events and history surrounding the life and teaching of Jesus.

Hendrickson has so well pointed out, “The sojourn of Jesus on earth must be viewed **not** primarily as a series of things that happened to him but rather as the accomplishment of a task assigned to him.” He states, “Other children are born. They are wholly passive in their birth. He, too, was born, but He also *came* [emphasis mine]. Moreover, He came with a purpose: not to take but to give, to give His soul as a ransom in the place of many (Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45), to seek and to save that which was lost.”

So, what have we learned already this year? What we have learned so far is that Matthew’s purpose up to this point has been to reveal the birth of Jesus the Messiah as the rightful heir to David’s throne, in a specific place, and within a specific time period and for a specific reason. Jesus, who was from the beginning God, became man to unite both Jew and Gentile in one saving act of grace initiated by His virgin birth as foretold by the prophets and witnessed by the shepherds, and Magi. All the ancillary information supports the main point of the revelation or manifestation of the Christ, the Chosen One.

Ok, now that we have some of the facts, what are we going to do with them? Good question, so we need to pause here for a moment to consider a life application plan for utilizing what we have learned so far.

Hendrickson’s former statement bears repeating again, “The sojourn of Jesus on earth must be viewed **not** primarily as a series of things that happened to him but rather as the accomplishment of a task assigned to him.”

Hendrickson's statement speaks to meaning and purpose in life. Where there is no meaning and purpose in life, human beings emotionally and mentally atrophy and then they eventually die, and if not literally then figuratively, they rust out in futility – often just wondering in the circles of everyday monotony.

The first of the New Year tends to be a time when we reevaluate our lives by taking mental inventories, making course corrections, and setting new goals. When we as a faith community consider our humble beginnings and how much God has blessed us since we began to worship together as Holy Trinity Old Catholic Church, our short history is nothing short of being called truly amazing.

The future looks bright as we enter the New Year. We have a strong foundation, a wonderful core group of people, and we have a beautiful facility that will be even more beautiful and functional when we finish the new vestibule and sanctuary expansion. Most of you have seen the drawings for the new vestibule enclosure, and we will be adding to the project the expansion of the church for more seating, the Lord willing.

Therefore and in summary, we have learned that the Epiphany is all about the manifestation of the Lord to a lost and dying world. So then, if we are known as the Bride of Christ and joint heirs with Him, then are we not to become the manifestation of the Lord to the world too? Indeed, my point here is, now is the time for the manifestation of Holy Trinity to the world. I'm not talking about the global world but the world in the sense of those who are lost, disenfranchised and disconnected from the Church.

Jesus came that we might go. Bishop Bob gave us a simple charge, he said, sheep beget sheep. It's that simple. Individually and collectively we have been commissioned to spread the Good News, to be the refulgence or flashback of the love of God in Christ Jesus. Ours is the task not only see the lost redeemed, but also to provide them a place to hear the Word of God, receive the Sacraments, and experience the friendship, support, and love of fellow sojourners in the faith. How we will accomplish our mission is still to be revealed. I would ask each of you, begin to pray if you haven't been already. Pray that the Lord will give our faith community discernment, wisdom, and resolve to accomplish our mission.

We may still have many needs, but as mentioned earlier we have many blessings to give. During the next few weeks we will continue to pray and then we will plan to spend sometime together to collectively discern God's direction and plans for this coming year. We will give plenty of time to make arrangements for our collective time together.

The Magi left home and comfort to seek out a newborn King. To follow the star they had to proceed in faith. Herod, when he heard of their plans, well, he exercised faith too, but unfortunately faith of the wrong kind. Thinking to save and serve himself, he killed every male child under the age of two in that region.

Lest we forget, well-grounded faith must be our guiding star too. The Bible guides our direction and holds us true by the compass of faith. We don't want to be accused of serving ourselves and neglecting the weak and needy and thereby allowing them to live

without hope. So, let us go forth this New Year in the vision and resolve of the Magi to adore, worship, and serve the newborn King.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.