

January 2, 2022 B  
The Epiphany of the Lord

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

Matthew 2:1-12

“Behold, the Lord, the Mighty One has come; and kingship is in his grasp, and power and dominion.”

Today's Entrance Antiphon draws us into the celebration of the Eucharist and the recognition of the Epiphany of the Lord. By definition, the term Epiphany means appearance, manifestation, or presentation. Therefore, a brief theological description of the Epiphany would suggest that the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Jesus' Incarnational Kingship.

Church history and tradition suggest that Christmas is not a single event or a single day of celebration; not at all, instead it is a prolonged religious season of remembrance that starts on December 25<sup>th</sup> and depending on the religious context spans a two to three-week timeframe in which the faithful are called to enter more deeply into the mystery of the *Incarnation*.

In Eastern Christianity the Epiphany is a term associated with a Christian feast day that is observed on January 6 or 7<sup>th</sup> the last day of the twelve days of Christmastide commemorating the manifestation of the Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi coming to pay homage to the Christ child. In the West the Epiphany is celebrated on January 2<sup>nd</sup> with January 6<sup>th</sup> reserved to remember the baptism of Jesus.

Subsequently in the West the Christmas season reaches its highest point today during the Solemnity of the Epiphany and then for the most part ends next Sunday with the Baptism of the Lord.

However, to better grasp the true meaning of The Epiphany of the Lord wisdom suggest that we utilize the historical framework and tradition of the early Church. Known today in many parts of the world as *Little Christmas*, the Eastern Church first celebrated the Epiphany on the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> day of January, a day set aside to commemorate the Theophany or vision of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In fact, history supports the notion that the Epiphany celebrations on January 6 - 7<sup>th</sup> predate any current Christmas festivities and may have initially been the date the early church celebrated the birth of Our Lord.

When the celebration of the birth of Christ was adjusted with the Gregorian Calendar to be celebrated on December 25<sup>th</sup> - and thus in accordance with the 12 Days of Christmas - January 6<sup>th</sup> then became more associated with commemorating the visitation of the Magi, the baptism of Jesus, and/or His first miracle at the Cana Wedding Feast.

Subsequently, in concert with the older Julian calendar some Orthodox Churches continue to celebrate the Nativity on *Old Christmas Day* January 7<sup>th</sup> and the Epiphany 12 days later January 19<sup>th</sup>.

Needless to say, for the non-liturgical Christian it can be somewhat confusing as to what the historical Church is actually celebrating when it refers to the Epiphany. While many in the church see no

real value in an extended Christmas season, we here at Holy Trinity purpose to be more in concert with the theology of the historical Eastern church while practicing the observance traditions of the Western Rite churches that we find ourselves in association with.

Now concerning the Gospel reading. Let's take a few moments to talk about some of the key components found within today's reading. The record states that in the days of King Herod Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. Here we notice the exact location where Jesus was born. The text makes a concrete statement that he was born in Bethlehem, known as the "House of Bread" in the Hebrew language.

Next we learn about King Herod. So, who was he? Well for starters we learn that King Herod was not a legitimate king, in fact he was a puppet king set up by the Roman government. Secondly, he was not of the house of David - nor was he of the tribe of Judah so he really had no legitimate historical right to be the king of Israel.

Hence one of the reasons he was so concerned about the announcement that a new king of Israel was to be born. He did not want to lose his illegitimate position and title. In fact, Herod was so obsessed with maintaining his worldly position that he even had members of his own family killed to maintain his political appointment.

Now let us turn to the topic of the Magi. The gospel reading gives little information concerning them. Here the historical church has come to understand that the Magi were learned and wise men. Secondly these men were Gentiles, they were not Israelites, and even though they were not devout Jews they were still men who exercised great spiritual intuition.

Possibly kings in their own countries they also possessed an inner spiritual compass that directed them to study the Scriptures and look to the heavens for signs concerning Isaiah's prophecy regarding the birth of Israel's new king.

Historical documents give no concrete number of Magi appearing before the Christ child, nor do they mention any particular names for the traveling astrologers, or ascribe any elaborate mystical hidden meaning to their gifts other than the fact that today's readings mentions three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh born on dromedaries from three different middle eastern regions, and subsequently the consensus is that there were three Magi who visited Jesus.

But as to any name being ascribed to a Magi and/or any other particulars relevant to embellishing the chronicle have most likely been added as a result of continued redaction and story telling.

Now before we go on there is one more key component in the story that ought to be discussed and that is the star. What about the star? How could a star direct the Magi to the Christ child and not be noticed by everyone else? We will address that one later.

Philosophers, theologians, scientists, and even some politicians have spent copious hours searching the literature, studying the sacred texts resulting in reams of speculation and theory trying to explain this mystery. Even King Herod himself took special interest in the matter when the Magi from the east asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."

The Bible states that after the Magi left Herod's court the star once again preceded them, and then stopped over the house where the

child was. Needless to say, we've all probably heard numerous explanations concerning the star. Astronomers and scientists both have their theories, philosophers have their speculations, and unfortunately theologians and Bible teachers often try to align themselves with whatever the most current idea or speculation is.

But what if we were to actually look to the Bible for the answer, what does it say? I think the answer to the star question might be found in reading Revelation 1:20 where it states, "The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lamp stands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamp stands which you saw are the seven churches."

Based on the information just mentioned, it could be reasonable to suggest that the star the Magi saw was none other than an angel of the Lord. In fact, think about it, the shepherds saw a great light and a heavenly host of angels. Therefore, it may not be too far fetched to postulate that the star was actually a host of angelic beings that directed the Magi to the place where the Christ Child was born. If you want even more evidence, take some time to do an Internet search concerning angels described as stars in the Bible.

So then we might ask, how long did it take for the Magi to travel to Bethlehem from their countries of origin? The exact timing of their travels is unknown, however one thing we do know is that by the time they arrived on the scene - the Holy Family had already found a house to dwell in. Here one can only speculate as to when the star or angel first appeared and the Magi's particular travel circumstances because at best camel caravans are capable of only doing about 18-25 miles per day on a good day. I personally think the star appeared when the angels announced his birth to the shepherds.

So then what are we to glean from this story? What is it that the Holy Spirit would want us to learn and assimilate into daily life? Well, that's a good question and the answers are unfortunately hidden in the wake of a busy and/or shortened Christmas season. We certainly need more than one day to contemplate all of these separate events. Even so let's try to delve a little deeper.

In this story all of the key parties had the same information. The Jewish prophets had proclaimed the birth of the Messiah King. According to tradition even some of the non-Jewish writings predicted the birth of a king. One such example is the *Fourth Eclogue*, the name of a Latin poem by the Roman poet Virgil written around 40 BC and published a couple of years later. "The work describes the birth of a boy, a supposed savior, who once of age will become divine and eventually rule over the world."<sup>1</sup>

So why is it then that only a few Magi saw the angel or star? How was it - if it was a real star as some proclaim it was - how was it that the whole world did not see the blazing light of a distant sun (that's what stars are) and only a few shepherds and three wise men did?

Needless to say the Incarnation is definitely a mystery, but hopefully there are a few key points here that will help us to understand this mystery. Here we will soon discover that the answers are not in the particulars, i.e., the names and number of Magi, the timing of the trip or the particulars of the three Magi kings. No the answers lie in the comparison of the attitudinal dispositions of the converging five kings.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_interpretations\\_of\\_Virgil's\\_Eclogue\\_4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_interpretations_of_Virgil's_Eclogue_4)

Five kings you say, I thought there were only three kings. Well then, maybe the sub-title of this story ought to be the “Journey of the Five Kings.” Think about it, were there not five kings whose lives were destined to converge in a certain city called Bethlehem – the House of Bread in Hebrew or House of Meat in Arabic?

Indeed, certainly holy men of God foretold the meeting well in advance. One king was to be announced as the New-born God/man King of kings born in the city of Bethlehem to set His people free.

Then there were the three kings, who traveled to Bethlehem from the East. Earlier in the second reading we heard about the results of their ministry via the pen of St Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians. Collectively the Magi represent all the Gentile peoples of the world as they came to humble themselves and pay homage to this heavenly but earthly newborn King of kings.

The fifth king was a false king. King Herod was all about himself. His main concern was one of self-interest. Willing to go to any length to maintain his prideful ego - even to the point of causing the death of thousands of infants was no matter to him.

So, there we have it – the lives of five historical people – six if you include yourself, why include yourself, well who sits on the throne of your heart, King Jesus or king I – me? All of us were destined to intersect at a given point and in each place in time for a specific reason. Our collective stories posit the question, “How will I respond to the King of kings? I can only follow one of two different directions, I can acknowledge Him as King, Lord and Redeemer, bow and offer Him my life, gifts, and talents or I can stand defiant and fight to maintain my own self-directed will.

The journey to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord starts with a willingness to first look up to the heavens. One cannot see the stars in the heavens while preoccupied with the dust of the earth.

Indeed, “If we have seen His star at its rising – then let us purpose to worship and pay Him homage.”

If we intend to only pursue our own stardom, then let the Psalmist’s revelation be a warning; “All kings shall pay Him homage, all nations will serve Him.”

In the final analysis, “He shall rescue the poor when he cries out, and the afflicted when he has no one to help him. He shall have pity on the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor He shall save.

In closing, may I posit that only those who are poor in spirit will be in tuned with the singing of starlike angels rising,

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to people of good will. We praise you; we bless you; we adore you.

We glorify you; we give you thanks for your great glory, Lord God heavenly King, O God almighty Father. . . .

Sound familiar, it is - we proclaim the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* each time He gathers us to the Eucharistic celebration? That’s why we do what we do. We proclaim His resurrection until He comes again.

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