

## Ordinary People

### Epiphany – Matthew 2:1-12

*preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, January 5, 2014*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Until Friday evening when we had a clearer picture of just how unclear the weather picture would be this morning, we were to have been treated [at the 10:00 service] this morning with a Godly Play lesson about Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. In the spirit of that lesson, rather than those for the Second Sunday of Christmas, we had chosen to use the readings for the Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ, which is actually tomorrow, January 6. Not wanting to have families risking more than they ought, we decided to move our pageant, slash lesson from the Atrium, to *next* Sunday morning, thus bringing your usual preacher up from the on-deck circle a bit early for however many of you made it here this morning. So having delayed one educational opportunity this morning, I thought I'd put on my teacher hat and wax a bit educational in a *different* way this morning.

What does that mean – “The Epiphany”? As a noun, “epiphany” is a perfectly good English word that most of us just don't throw around all that often. In the dictionary, “epiphany” is defined as (1) a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something (2) an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking (3) an illuminating discovery. One might have an epiphany, an “a-ha” moment, about a scientific concept, or a musical piece, or a piece of literature. One might even have an epiphany about one's relationship with someone else. “Epiphany” is a good word – and I suspect teachers might at least occasionally like to see its nuanced use in writing, rather than, “I had a good idea.”

But we in the Church don't talk about *an* epiphany – we talk about *the* Epiphany. The “sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning” that we celebrate today, is the sudden manifestation and perception of the essential nature of *Jesus Christ*. Specifically, we celebrate that that essential nature was not only manifested to the ancient people of God, but to the larger world *outside* Israel, the world of the Gentiles, the world to which almost all of *us* belong. And we see that sudden manifestation in this morning's lesson from Matthew's Gospel, as “wise men” come from the east, from *outside* Israel, to worship the new-born “king of the Jews,” and end up making one heck of an “illuminating discovery.”

The celebration of *the* Epiphany is tightly tied up with this story of visitors from the East. All sorts of legends and customs have grown up around this story over the two thousand years of Church history. For example, it is the gifts brought by the visitors that brings the whole idea of gift giving into our Christmas traditions. In some parts of the world, the feast is much more commonly called “Three Kings Day” and in some places, children actually wait until *January 6* to give and receive presents instead of Christmas Day. I wonder how our kids would you like *that!*

But since we've got these few minutes to think about the Epiphany this morning, maybe we can take a closer look at a couple of things.

The first issue is that this story routinely gets conflated with, “smushed” together with the Christmas story. Part of that is that the stories follow one another so closely in Matthew's Gospel. None of the other Gospel writers say *anything* about these wise men, and Matthew doesn't say much about the birth. Other than the opening line of this morning's lesson and the closing line of last week's when Matthew says that Joseph named his new son, Jesus, Matthew doesn't seem to think the birth itself was all that spectacular. Over time, Matthew's story of the visitors, and Luke's marvelous account of Jesus's *birth* have been jumbled together in so many legends and children's pageants and nativity scenes, that in most of our heads, we see the Holy Family and the

shepherds and the kings all gathered ‘round together around the manger, with angels singing, and a bright star shining. If these visitors came from any distance, of course, responding to a star announcing the birth, it is highly likely that it took them some time to get there. Matthew apparently records that the Holy Family had at least found proper shelter by the time the visitors arrived, since he says they went into the *house* and saw the child and his mother. And if Herod’s timing in the next gruesome bit of Matthew’s story is any indication, it may have been as much as two years after Jesus’s birth.

The second issue is the *number* of visitors. Look at the text again. How many wise men came from the east? More than one, because the text (even in Greek, I’m told) is plural. We get the idea of three visitors from the gifts given to the baby Jesus: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Three gifts – *must* be three visitors, right? Matthew simply doesn’t say. But by the third century, there were three kings, by the fourth century, their names were Balthazar, Gaspar and Melchior, and by the fifth century, they represented the nations of the whole Gentile world – and one of them was black.

Finally, and I think most importantly to our understanding of the Epiphany of Our Lord, is the issue of who these visitors were. We have taken to calling them the Three Kings, as in, “We Three Kings of orient are...” But their royalty comes from the same legends that make them three in number and of various races and such. What is translated as “wise men” here in our text, however, is the Greek word “magi.” It’s the word from which we get the English words magic and magician. Now, some scholars opine that these “magi” were of the semi-royal priestly caste of some middle eastern society such as the Parthians. And other scholars speculate that they were priests of the ancient Babylonian religion of Zoroastrianism. And of course, *legend* just says they were kings, representing in hierarchical terms all the people of the world.

Regardless how many Discovery Channel specials you see, however, *I* think it’s quite likely that these visitors, these magi, were just well-to-do astrology nuts, with a lot of time on their hands. Looking to the stars to tell them what to do and where to go, they saw something interesting in the heavens, they dug through ancient Hebrew prophecies, and they packed their stuff and went traipsing off into the desert to find out what was going on. Maybe they weren’t pious kings and priests, so much as they were ordinary people, looking to catch sight of the *extraordinary* work of God in their world. Ordinary people, looking to be touched in some small way by the divine. Ordinary people, looking for... an *epiphany*. Ordinary people, looking for an illuminating discovery, looking for an intuitive grasp of reality through something simple and striking, looking for a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. Ordinary people, doing their best to catch a glimpse of what God might have in store for *them*. And they found it!

Maybe they weren’t “We Three Kings.” Maybe they were ordinary people like you and me, who received their epiphany, ordinary people who were the first to receive *the* Epiphany, in the eyes, and in the face, and in the *life*, of a newborn baby, who happened to *also* be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Maybe we need to keep *our* eyes open, too. Happy Epiphany!