

Have You Had An Epiphany Lately?

Traditionally the church marks twelve days of Christmas beginning with the nativity of Jesus and ending with the arrival of the Magi as recorded in the gospel of Matthew which was the gospel text I read this morning. Sometimes the nativity scenes we display don't acknowledge this difference in arrival at the manger. And this arrival of the Magi on the church calendar may or may not coincide with a Sunday as it does this year, but it is always called the Epiphany of the Lord. Our culture often truncates the Christmas season from both ends—failing to include the anticipation of the second coming of Christ which is uplifted during Advent due to our preoccupation with the retail and secular activity of the season justified by the gifts brought by the Magi to the infant Jesus—and likewise shortening the time afterward in the rush to take down decorations and return presents received Christmas morning. The church calendar varies from the one used to mark our daily life in that it sets apart events and things of importance to our understanding of what the church is in the world—of the church's understanding of whom we are called to be in the world. The church calendar names the events of which our scriptures declare that we should take note—that we should remember—that we are to separate from other happenings as being of importance. These events are arranged in seasons, much like the seasons of the year and there is an orderly progression. The church year begins with the season of Advent. It is marked with the liturgical color of purple or blue. It is a four week season of anticipation whose name is Latin for coming. It signals that we are awaiting the coming of Christ—not just as Emmanuel—the babe born in Bethlehem on Christmas morn, but the coming of the victorious Christ who will come in glory and whose second coming for which we should prepare. The liturgical color is changed to white on Christmas Eve as the Christmas Season begins. You will notice it is still white this morning as we celebrate Epiphany. Next Sunday, the liturgical color will also be white, but it will not be white because of the Christmas season, but because it will be a time to remember another special event: The Baptism of the Lord. After that the liturgical color will be green for awhile during what are often call “ordinary” times. This is often a misunderstood term as it doesn't mean ordinary in the sense of not eventful but in the sense of ordinal—the Sundays are counted between the major events. You may notice after next Sunday, the bulletin will read that it is a certain numbered Sunday after Epiphany---in other words—this event—Epiphany marked an event that the church did indeed consider important. Sometimes that importance might not be so easy to discern. For one thing we are so familiar with the gospel accounts that we often fail to realize that they are four very distinct narratives and that only two of them actually give us any information about Jesus before he began his adult ministry—before the baptism which we will consider next Sunday. Not only that, but the visit of the Magi does not happen in the gospel of Luke from which we have the narrative of the journey to Bethlehem and the appearance of the angels to shepherds at Jesus' birth. And when Matthew tells us of Jesus' birth, he speaks more of Joseph than of Mary, no shepherds visit the manger only the Magi arrive to pay homage with their gifts after stopping to visit Herod in Jerusalem. What did the early recorders of the narratives of Jesus' life find so important about this visit that it was included in what was preserved for us? What crucial points are made in this text that we need to consider? To begin with, why is this event called Epiphany? I don't think that epiphany is a word that is frequently used, although I have occasionally heard it outside of this context. But just for clarification I

decided to go to Webster's to check for the official meaning. Webster's gives three possible meanings. The first one listed is the appearance or manifestation of a god or other supernatural being. Well, Jesus' birth definitely fits that category, but we celebrate that appearance on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. So why is this Sunday which is almost two weeks later termed Epiphany Sunday? The second dictionary entry tells us that Epiphany is the yearly marking of the visit of the Magi to Judea by the Christian church. That seems an obvious meaning, especially since that is reflected in the passage read from Matthew's gospel this morning. Not only the Matthew text but the Isaiah passage seems to full of connections to this event: verse 3: "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" for the Magi observed and followed a "star at its rising". Then again in verse 6, Isaiah says "they shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord". The Magi's stated purpose was to pay homage to the child born king of the Jews and brought chests containing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So it is clear that both of these dictionary meanings are directly related to the scriptures and the traditions of the Christian faith, but aside from that identification of the event—the narration of the story—does looking at the dictionary meaning give us any further indication of why it is important to remember that Magi—wise men—traveled from the East to Bethlehem to pay homage to this new born king? There are actually three meanings for epiphany listed in the dictionary. I think this third meaning is one that is helpful in understanding why this visit of the Magi is important for the church today—beyond the tradition of bringing gifts to the newborn babe. The third meaning of epiphany is that it is a moment of sudden intuitive understanding or the event which triggered that moment of understanding. The wise men made that long journey because they had an epiphany. That journey began when they had a moment when they understood that something momentous had happened in the world with the appearance of that star which arose. This change which happened on earth was reflected in the heavens above them. Their observations confirmed the importance of the event—it was an event heralded not just by the angelic host to the local shepherd but to those in far distant lands.

As with all scriptures the question which we need to consider is where is the epiphany for us today? Within the narrative of these events which took place so long ago, what is the message which is relevant for us? What will provide us with an epiphany, a sudden intuitive understanding of what God was doing when he set that star in the sky and sent those men on that journey from their home to pay homage to a child born to peasants in an obscure village in Judea? I think that what God was doing was much the same thing that he was doing when he sent the angel to the shepherd in the fields outside Bethlehem and then the angelic host to sing a song of glory. The star was also a birth announcement. It was just an announcement to a different audience. There are traditions surrounding this visit of the Magi. Then there are the things actually said within our text. These two sources of information are not exactly the same. The text tells us they came from the East. Church traditions have assigned names and countries to these visitors, but the text does not. What mattered to the gospel narrator was that they came from a distant land, a land not associated with the faith of those living in Judea, but it didn't matter exactly where this place was located, just that it was far away. Nor was it important who they were as individuals or what titles they might have had. They came from outside the faith traditions of Israel, so they were not looking at traditions they had received from their ancestors in order to assign meaning to their observations. They were called Magi by

Matthew. This designation was understood to be mean that they were scholars who studied astrology; that they those who looked to the skies to understand and explain events which happened on earth. This text is telling us that by writing Jesus' birth announcement in the skies, it was a message sent to those outside the "chosen" family of Israel. Jesus' birth was revealed to the Gentiles at the moment of the nativity—at the moment when it happened—not later. Emmanuel was always meant to be God with all of us. It is still important for us to remember that God's gift was never meant to be exclusive, but inclusive. What else does this text tell us? Having observed this new star at its rising, these Magi undertook a long journey. They didn't just jot down their observations and wait to see what might happen. They didn't just tell some friends or compare notes and then go about their usual routines. They didn't even recognize that it might be significant and sent their gifts by courier. No, they packed up and went on a long journey to Judea. The text doesn't exactly say how long they traveled, but they left their own country. The star was for them a summons...which they answered. Perhaps this is part of the importance of epiphany for us. It is a summons for us as well. We are called to come and recognize the importance of that journey we make to Bethlehem to kneel at the manger—to greet the child who will become our Lord and Savior—and indeed the Lord and Savior of the World. We are summoned to be present—not just noting the Christmas story and nativity as tradition and ritual which comes every year, but as an event which calls us to make a particular journey to experience God's entrance into history. The text tells us that these Magi came to pay homage: to fall down and worship this infant who was destined to be king. The text also tells us that as they neared their destination they took a detour, they stopped in Jerusalem at the palace of King Herod assuming that the new King would be born there. This stop had some significant ramifications. We read that Herod was frightened and all Jerusalem with him when the Magi inquired about the child who was to be king. Herod calls together the scribes and priests of Jerusalem who refer the inquiring Magi to a text from the prophet Micah which states that a ruler shall come from Bethlehem. The Micah 2 passage describes a shepherd being given to the people. This in truth describes the king of the Jews whose birth was announced. What was fulfilled in the birth of this child was not the one who would bring wealth to Israel or restore power to the kingdom. What was fulfilled was one who would rule by shepherding, by seeking the lost, by uplifting the oppressed. Yes, Herod had a reason to be frightened for this child would challenge all the things which made him powerful. When we read these passages, do we take the time to understand this gift from the beginning is told in terms of a ruler who symbolizes love and caring for all God's people. This king—this gift from God—represents the overturning of conventional understanding of power. The story continues by telling us that the star was still in the sky when the Magi left Jerusalem and set out for Bethlehem. It was still waiting to lead them directly to the place where Jesus lay. They then paid homage to the child who was with his mother Mary. They offered their gifts. Then they returned home, by a different route, ignoring Herod's request to return to him with information about the child. They disappear from history. We are not told whether or not this journey changed their lives. Maybe it didn't. But the question we need to ask ourselves is how does this journey we make symbolically to kneel in Bethlehem each Christmas change our lives? Does understanding that this child came to shepherd us; not to give prosperity change how we view his birth? Does following his star alter how we live and interact with one another? Maybe

if we consider these things we will find that we truly have an epiphany as we make our journey to Bethlehem. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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