

# The Epiphany of the Lord

January 8, 2017

Saint Mary of the Assumption Parish

## Today's Scripture Reading

Only St. Matthew's Gospel includes the story of the magi, whose visit to the Christ child is celebrated on this Feast of the Epiphany. After centuries of conflating the details of the birth of Jesus found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, many Christians regard the visit of the magi as one of several elements of the Christmas story. The woven-together story of Christmas gets most of the attention, while the significance of each element can be easily overlooked.

Matthew wrote his Gospel for a largely Jewish Christian community that was beginning to integrate and accept Gentile converts after decades of avoidance and separation. Matthew's intent in writing his Gospel was to announce that the kingdom of God had begun with the birth of Jesus, the promised Messiah. More than any other evangelist, Matthew took great pains to link the life and mission of Jesus to the promises of salvation that God made through the Hebrew prophets. When he wrote about the birth of Jesus, Matthew provided details that would have had great significance for Jewish Christians, including references to the Scriptures, Jesus' descent from the line of David, and his devout Jewish parents. The very next thing Matthew reported was the visit of the magi. Matthew wanted his readers to understand that Jesus was the Messiah promised to Israel, but the salvation that he offered, and the kingdom he came to establish, were intended for all people.

God chose a special people and revealed himself to them; through those people, the Messiah came into the world. However, the announcement of his birth was made to magi, people outside the covenant between God and Israel. The star that rose over Bethlehem beckoned Gentile magi to come and find a newborn king who was born for them, too. For Matthew, the Epiphany was not about the discovery of the Christ Child by curious outsiders. He emphasized that when salvation came in the person of Jesus, God, through a wonder he himself created—a star—called the magi forth to see what he had done, in Israel, but for all people.

Today's other readings echo what Matthew's Gospel conveyed by the magi's visit: that salvation through Jesus is meant for all. In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet speaks of a light that will come to Israel. This light will be the glory of God and it will beckon people from every nation. The prophet's words anticipate a time when visitors from other nations will come bearing riches to be laid in homage before the glory of God.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle alludes to another revelation from God, this one just as unexpected and grace-filled. Paul, who once regarded Jewish life and law as the exclusive way to righteousness and a sign of God's favor, learned the mystery of salvation through direct revelation by Jesus himself. Paul, a devout Pharisee and zealous persecutor of the followers of Jesus, was chosen to carry the good news of salvation into the world far beyond Israel where the promise began.

## Sunday Readings and Backgrounds

### Reading I: Isaiah 60:1-6

#### Your light has come!

- The reading from Isaiah refers to a time of great hope in ancient Israel.
- Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, was about to be rebuilt.
- In today's passage, Isaiah associates light with the glory of God's presence.

### Responsorial Psalm: 72: 1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13

#### Lord, every nation on earth will adore you.



### Reading II: Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

#### We all share the same promise!

- In the second reading, we glimpse a beginning of God's Kingdom in time.
- Paul stresses that God's promise to Israel is fulfilled in Jesus.
- All people, both Gentiles and Jews share in salvation in Christ.

### Gospel: Matthew 2:1-12

#### They opened their coffers and presented him with gifts.

- The Gospel reading today links Jesus to God's promise to Israel.
- The royal title given by the Magi to Jesus points to his role as Messiah.
- In ancient times, the birth of a great person was often associated with astrological events.

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# God's Self-Revelation

If you think that hearing another part of the Christmas story as late as January 8 is stretching it out too much, just imagine what those Magi felt as they trudged through the desert toward Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. Their trek probably lasted even longer than the commercial Christmas season. Matthew then took their story and fashioned it as a subtle summary of the entire Gospel message. All we have to do is decode it a little.

First, while Matthew explains that Jesus came from good Jewish stock, he makes it equally clear that God isn't into racial purity. Besides Mary, there are four women mentioned in Jesus' genealogy, each of them a foreigner; collaboration with God's plan was not limited by the bloodlines of the chosen people. In fact, Joseph's acceptance of the pregnant Mary and Herod's use of Scripture to further his plan to harm the infant Jesus demonstrate that scrupulous adherence to law and belief in messianic prophecies don't necessarily prove faithfulness to God. Now we see that in Matthew's Gospel the first people to give homage to Jesus were probably Arabs, "pagans" who learned from nature rather than Scripture that God was up to something in their day.

These pilgrims fit the description of "God fearers." They were people looking for more, who believed in signs indicating that God was involved in human history. They were also ready to go a distance to see.

The Magi followed a star, a sign in their own tradition, but they didn't limit themselves to their own religious background. Upon arriving to Jerusalem, they sought counsel from the faith of the people of that place. When "they sought diligently," Jewish wisdom together with their own tradition led them to the child. Matthew records no commentary about the family's modest setting, but only says that they saw the child and prostrated themselves in homage. Then, adding practical content to their religious sentiment, they "opened their treasures" and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We might say they worshiped in word and deed.

We picture them as three because of the three gifts that are named. In reality, they could have been two or ten or more; they could have been a retinue including women and children. But what's important about them is what they have to tell us about seeking and finding, about worship that has integrity. Without mentioning the Magi, St. Augustine reflected on how human nature was created with a thirst for the divine: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." The Magi were people gifted with what Augustine might have called the grace of holy restlessness. Apparently well-to-do enough to take a long journey and arrive with expensive gifts, they set off with



enough interior freedom to be responsive to the Spirit who urged them to look for more than they already had and knew.

We use the story of the Magi's seeking and finding as the frame for our feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of God's self-revelation. The combination of this story and the meaning of the feast make a subtle theological statement intimating that only those who are willing to go a distance in their seeking will discover God's self-manifestation. We might look to e e cummings for light on the mystery of the Epiphany journey. In his poem "somewhere i have never travelled" he writes:

somewhere i have never travelled, gladly beyond  
any experience, your eyes have their silence:  
in your most frail gesture are things which enclose me,  
or which i cannot touch because they are too near

That's an ode to the beloved. At the same time, perhaps unintentionally, cummings' poetry suggests an insight into what it meant to gaze on the Christ Child; it's meditation on the dance between humans and the God who lures us to share divine life. When the Magi encountered the babe they had indeed traveled beyond any experience and found great power in frailty.

Today is a good day for poetry, the sort of reading that demands both quiet contemplation and the restlessness of spirit that opens us to what lies beyond anything we already understand. The journey of the Magi is a reminder that the pilgrimage toward God is long. As the Magi seeking a king found a poor child, our journey will surprise us as well. In telling of the Magi, strangers to the traditions of Israel, Matthew intended to shake us out of our ethnocentrism and facile assumptions about other people's beliefs and our own as well.

The story of the star leading to Bethlehem's child is one more rendition of God's gentle yet unrelenting overtures to humanity. In the effort to draw us close, God will use anything from stars and prophecies to poetry or restlessness. If we are open to the grace of seeing, anything and everything can be an epiphany. ~Mary Mc Glone