

# *Sermon: Epiphany*

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January 8, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7,10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany which commemorates the the revelation of Christ as the son of God. Actually, we might almost better call it the Feast the Epiphanies. There are three instances of the announcement of Jesus's divine nature. The Eastern Church prefers the announcement during John's baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, where the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus and a voice from heaven announces, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". The Eastern Church celebrates the baptism on January 6 as the Epiphany. The Western church prefers either the miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana or, more popularly, the visitation of the Magi. In fact, the celebration is known in some areas as Three Kings Sunday.

So, let's look at the Magi and what we actually know about them. To start, I must admit that there really isn't a lot of information available on them. What we do know for certain, is found in today's gospel reading. How many were there? Despite the Christmas carol, you know, "We three kings of Orient are...", Matthew doesn't say that there were three. He gives no number. Were they really kings? We don't know. Were they afoot, horseback or camelback? Again Matthew doesn't say.

Tradition and the interpretation of other scriptural passages are used to fill in some of the missing information. Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 60 provides a preview of the visitation of the Magi. Verse 3 says, "Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn". This verse provides the origins of the notion that the Magi were kings and foretells of the star of Bethlehem. Verse 6 says, "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah. All those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."

From this we get the camels as transportation and two of the three gifts that tradition tells us were brought to the baby Jesus. In Psalm 72, verses 10 and 11 reinforce the idea of the Magi as kings: "May the kings of Tarshish and the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service." Historically, the Magi were Persian followers of Zoroaster, the prophet of ancient Persia, also known as Zarathustra. His followers were the inventors of astrology and magic. Scott Hoezee of the Center for Excellence In Preaching at Calvin College has a low opinion of those Magi involved in the visitation of the baby Jesus. He says, "The Magi were not only spiritually lost and religiously detestable [to the Jews], they were stupid. They bumbled into the court of the most paranoid man who had ever occupied a throne of power only to inquire after a newborn king in the neighborhood. Many Jewish babies would die before the larger story of all this was finished, and it was singularly the clueless nature of these pagans that was to blame for it all." Others, like our ELCA Bishop Craig Satterlee, see these men in the more traditional role of "wise men", more like priests of Zoroastrianism and astrologers at a time when astrology was regarded as a science. In other words, they were wise and learned men who happened to practice another religion. Bishop Satterlee does point out the irony of God's use of these men to inform Herod of the birth of Jesus.

Either way, kings, priests or scientists notwithstanding, how many of you know the names of the Magi? If you thought Casper, Balthasar, and Melchior, you are correct. Looking at Matthew, Isaiah and Psalm 72, where do we get those names? Here, tradition contributes the answer. Since one of the three events that the Feast of the Epiphany celebrates is the Baptism of Christ, it became, second only to Easter, the preferred day for baptism into the early church. The water left over from baptism was used to bless the homes of the faithful and it became customary to write over the doorposts "C+B+M". This stood for the Latin "Christus benedicat mansionem" or "Christ blesses this house". According to theologian Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "since the three kings were also remembered at the same time, someone decided to give them names, and to use CBM as their initials-Caspar, Balthasar and Melchior. The names stuck".

Tradition is behind the inclusion of myrrh as a gift given to the Christ child by the Magi, too. The gold indicated that Jesus was a king. The frankincense indicated that he was divine. The myrrh, not mentioned by Matthew, is a resin used in preparing bodies for burial. It indicated that Jesus would die for us. That's from tradition, not scripture.

There is another revelation in the story of the Magi. Amy Peeler, Associate Professor of New Testament at Wheaton College writes of the Epiphany, "First noted in the fourth century, this celebration of the revelation of God to humanity called the faithful to reflect upon the awesome reality of the incarnation. God became man; in Christ, the two natures were neither confused nor divided. The revelation of this unity prepared the way for another, for the Gentiles to be joined with God's people, Israel." It is this revelation that is the subject of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 1, Paul says that the Ephesians have been "chosen for adoption". Amy Peeler says that in Chapter 2 Paul "describes the mystery explicitly. They, as Gentiles, were formerly separate from God and his people, but now in Christ, the two have been made one. In Chapter 3, today's New Testament reading, we find Paul jailed, that is a prisoner, for teaching "against the law' and 'for bringing Greeks into the Temple". The Jewish authorities took a dim view of that kind of behavior. Again to quote Peeler, "Paul, however, seems undaunted by his circumstances. In his view, this is the task to which God has called him." She adds that "for Paul, Epiphany is not just one day, but describes his entire life and calling." The two situations of God becoming man but remaining God and the inclusion of all others who were not born into God's people into His grace is really more than I can get my head around on my best day. That Paul might have lived every day celebrating these two events is also beyond my best efforts. But, it does lead me to think about the nature of "church". From the very beginning, churches have been places of conformity to a commonly held ideas and behavioral norms, not just dogma. Many of the commentators that I read complained about how "church" had become a place of sameness with a narrow insular view of things beyond the religious beliefs of their particular denomination. But, the Epiphany reminds us that's not how it was in Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Whoever the Magi were, they were very different

from the local residents, shepherds, and anyone else who might have attended the birth of Jesus. And, they were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus.

On this Epiphany, I am just happy that, in the words of the (old) Nicene Creed that "for us and our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man." I am also happy that Gentiles , by way of the Magi, whoever they might have been, were included in the miracle. Happy Epiphany.

Evans