

“CMB”

Isaiah 60.1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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January 6, 2019

Epiphany. One of the lesser celebrations of the Christian year, at least in this country, dwarfed by the great holidays of Christmas and Easter. It comes around thirteen days after Christmas every year, always on January 6, immediately following Twelfth Night. Every now and then it's on a Sunday.

The word “Epiphany” means “appearance.” The word was customarily used in ancient Greek to refer to the manifestation or appearance of a deity. Jews used the word to refer to the appearance of God at Mount Sinai. Christians began using the word to refer to the appearance of God, incarnate in Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul used the word to refer to Christ's appearance here on earth, and also to refer to Christ's appearance yet to come, in the fullness of time. Over time, the word came to refer to the events surrounding Christ's birth, and particularly to the visit of the wise men, as told in the Gospel of Matthew. For it was on that day that the glory of our God appeared for the first time to people who were not Jews.

The story is familiar to most of us. It's the tail end of the Christmas saga, the last event in typical Christmas pageants, with the result that most children who grow up in the church know the story. There's also that familiar Christmas carol, “We Three Kings,” although Matthew does not say that there were three of them (there were three *gifts*, but there might have been more than three travelers), nor does Matthew call them “kings.” The word Matthew uses is *magi*. Babylonians had used that word to refer to teachers, priests, physicians, astrologers, seers, interpreters of dreams, augers, soothsayers, sorcerers – men who would be considered *wise*. These were *learned* men. In this case, they were probably astrologers, people who studied the movement of the stars and planets. Evidently they had seen something, in their homeland far to the east, some special, unique apparition. There has been endless speculation through the centuries about what, *exactly*, they saw; there have been fanciful theories about a comet, or a conjunction of three planets in the night sky. Christians long ago considered it a “divine and angelic power that appeared in the form of a star.” It first led them towards Jerusalem, then disappeared from view for a time while they consulted with King Herod, then reappeared as they headed south about six miles to the city of Bethlehem. Matthew makes it clear that this bright celestial object was *moving*, leading them to a very specific residence. Despite what you may have seen in various nativity scenes, Mary and Joseph and the babe are, by this point, no longer in a stable adjacent to an inn. Matthew tells us they were in a *house*. Evidently some time has passed. That would make sense, because it had been a *very* long journey for those wise men; they had probably spent

many weeks on the road. Some people think that by the time they arrive, Mary and Joseph are married.

When they arrive, Matthew tells us, they were “overwhelmed with joy.” This child represents something that could not be found in the kingdom to the East from which they hailed. That country was undoubtedly prosperous, filled with both wisdom and riches, but here was something richer than knowledge and wiser than wealth. Here was *the Savior of the World*. Here was *GOD*.

Do not miss the significance of what they have done. They have come *seeking God*. They have taken the journey that *all* of us are called to take. The book of Deuteronomy encourages us to “seek the Lord your God,” and promises that “you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.” (Deuteronomy 4:29) The psalmist tells us that “the Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God.” (Psalm 14:2) Paul laments that in our basic human nature, “there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.” (Romans 3:11) These magi demonstrate just how *good* and *true* their wisdom is when they come *seeking God*. Jesus himself will later say, “Search, and you will find.” (Matthew 7:7) These magi came *searching* ... and they *found*. They found the Savior of the World. They found *God*. Right there, in that house, in Bethlehem of Judea, in a foreign land, far from home. A baby boy. *God*, wrapped in human form.

And they rejoiced. That is what we do, when we truly find God. We can not help but feel real, true, honest-to-goodness *joy*. This was no cheap substitute, no fake imitation. This was no man-made distraction, no religious decoy, no false idol. We pursue things like that all the time. Power, fame, glory, pleasure, you name it, all the ways we spend our time and our money, pursuing things that do not endure, do not give life, do not save our souls, do not *truly* bring joy. Finding God causes us to rejoice.

Finding, beholding, rejoicing, they bowed down. They bent the knee, they humbled themselves before his majesty, before the *glory* of God. They recognized their rightful place, letting go of all their self-centeredness, all their self-importance, all their pride. In their homeland, these men were regarded as wise; they were honored, respected, looked up to. Here, in the presence of God, they give honor to the One – the *only* One – who is *truly* worthy of all our respect, all our admiration, all our *awe*.

They offer their gifts. Precious gifts. *Expensive* gifts. *Gold*, a gift fit for a King. *Frankincense*, a gift suitable for a God. *Myrrh*, a perfume, mixed with oil to anoint priests, and used as a fragrance on a dead body. A gift, for the *real* High Priest. A gift, for the one who would die so that all of us might live.

God had come to earth *so that he could die*. I wonder if the wise men knew that.

They fulfilled prophecy, these wise men did, when they came. Isaiah had said that “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.... The abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of nations shall come to you.... They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” (Isaiah 60:3, 5, 6) Solomon had said that “the kings of Tarshish and the isles” would “render him tribute,” “the kings of Sheba and Seba” would “bear gifts,” that “gold of Sheba” would be “given to him.” (Psalm 72:10, 15) This is why the hymn calls them *kings*, for that is what Isaiah and Solomon had called them. Solomon says: “May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service.” (Psalm 72:11) This, we *all* must do: fall down before him; give him service.

Here in our country, Epiphany is often overlooked or forgotten. But in other parts of the world, Epiphany is celebrated in a wide variety of ways. In some Central and South American countries, on the night before Epiphany, children leave their shoes by the door or under their bed. In the morning, they wake to find gifts in their shoes that the wise men have left for them. In some European countries, children dress up as kings, in groups of three, proceeding from house to house, singing traditional songs and carrying a lantern symbolizing the star. In a village in southern India, three boys wearing splendid crowns and regal robes, meticulously groomed and bearing gifts of real gold, frankincense, and myrrh, descend a hill on horseback towards the village church, in a huge procession that leads directly into the worship service. In Malta, the National Orchestra holds a prestigious Epiphany Concert every year in honor of Epiphany. (We're doing something similar here later this afternoon!) In some countries, colorful processions and parades are common, sometimes accompanied by dancing; in some countries, children receive their presents on Epiphany rather than on Christmas; in certain countries, like Italy and Poland, the day of Epiphany is a national holiday. In many places around the world, Christians bake a Three Kings cake on Epiphany, containing a hidden bean or almond, and the person who gets the piece containing the hidden treasure becomes king or queen for the day. Epiphany is celebrated with great festivity and creativity in many parts of the world – but, sadly, not here. It seems to me that we would do well to recover some of these Epiphany traditions for ourselves, turning Epiphany back into a special event commemorating the wise men's visit to Bethlehem, the day God was revealed to the nations.

There is one tradition that we might be able to start fairly easily. In central Europe, there is a tradition on Epiphany of marking the doors of your home with a special blessing. Typically this is done with chalk, which in some places has been brought to church and blessed by the priest. People take the chalk home, and use it to inscribe a short series of letters, numbers, and symbols on their front doors:

20 + C + M + B + 19

The numbers – in this case, 20 and 19 – represent the year: 2019. The crosses, of course, represent Jesus Christ. The letters C, M, and B have a dual significance. First, they represent the traditional names of the wise men – Caspar, Melchoir, and Balthasar. Matthew does not give us those names, but Christian legends dating back to the earliest centuries of the church have given them those names: Caspar (or Gaspar), Melchoir, and Balthasar. Second, C, M, and B are also the first letters of the words in a traditional Latin blessing: *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, “May Christ bless this house.” The idea is that you inscribe this message on your door, inviting Jesus to bless you and your family and everyone who walks through your front door over the course of the entire year.

Now, I know there are some who still think we Presbyterians are God's “frozen chosen.” I'm inviting you to un-freeze yourselves. I have two options for you. I do have some chalk here. I'm going to bless this chalk, and you are welcome to take a piece home, and inscribe the message on or above your door. Alternatively, I have some cardstock here, with the message and the blessing printed on it, which you can attach to your door as you see fit. I want to encourage you, don't feel awkward about this; this is a *gift of God for you*, a blessing *for you and your household*. A way for you to *search for God*, the way those wise men did, long ago. In the seeking and in the finding, may you experience *true joy*.

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