

## Epiphany 2010

This Wednesday, January 6<sup>th</sup> is the Epiphany. What Epiphany is really all about is communication and identity and interpersonal relationships. Let's look at what this means.

First of all, the Epiphany is one of the great feast days of the Christian year, right up there with Christmas and Easter and Pentecost, but it's perhaps the only great festival day in the church year that is observed more in neglect than in celebration. Although it is an important holiday in many countries, Epiphany has really never caught on in mainstream American culture, having been eclipsed by Christmas itself. I remember a time when an elderly priest friend and I were talking about the observance of Christmas. I told her that Tish and I always put up our Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving and take it down on New Year's Eve. My friend, being a dyed-in-the-wool New Englander, said that she was brought up to observe Advent as a time of preparation, **then** to put the Christmas

tree up on Christmas Eve, and **then** to take it down on the Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas. However, even using that tradition, which recognizes the Epiphany as having a place on the calendar, it makes it look more like a day to conclude something, Christmastide, rather than to mark a new beginning. Since the early third century the Eastern Church celebrated the feast of the Epiphany honoring the baptism of Jesus. You'll remember that the first Sunday after the Epiphany, next Sunday, is one of the baptismal feasts of the church year. But during the fourth century the Western church disassociated the baptism from the feast of the Epiphany and left the celebration to honor an event that we usually think of as part of the Nativity story.

So what do we observe today? Today we remember a story, an event, which only appears in Matthew's gospel. Epiphany is traditionally the feast of the "Three Wise Men" from the East, called Magi in Scripture, meaning magicians or astrologers. This trio comes out of nowhere, looking for one who is born King of the Jews. Not only do they appear seemingly out of nowhere, but once they have knelt down

and paid Jesus homage and given their gifts, they disappear from Scripture just as suddenly as they first appeared. But the point of their journey remains forever important. They are foreigners and strangers; they are, as the Bible says, “from the East”. They are from outside Israel, from outside the ancient covenant between God and the people of Israel. They are Gentiles. And they are the first to understand what others could not yet see: that Jesus “has been born king of the Jews”. Sometimes the feast of the Epiphany is called the “manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles”.

In New Testament times Paul and Peter argue over whether the Gentiles—the foreigners, the strangers, the travelers and sojourners—are to be received into the Body of Christ, or whether it is reserved only for those of Israelite blood and lineage. Paul is convinced that he has been called as an “apostle to the Gentiles” while Peter thinks membership in the Body of Christ is reserved for Jews only. You know the outcome of this argument. There’s hardly a one of us worshiping here today who would be here today if Peter had won the argument. Paul preached the Good News to

the foreigners, those considered to be outside the covenant, and so we, the Gentiles, are included in the Body of Christ. But Matthew's story of the visit of the Wise Men makes it clear that the matter was decided by God, long before Peter and Paul argued about it. These "wise men from the East" were Gentiles, who saw the star, a sign from God, and followed it. And they followed it and they followed it until they came to the place where the newborn Jesus, king of the Jews, lay. And when they saw him they knelt down and offered homage to him. In other words, they pledged their allegiance to him. Offering their homage was a sign that they permanently committed themselves to follow him. And they were welcomed—and so are we.

How do we know that they were welcomed? Basically because their gifts were accepted. In fact, their gifts symbolize the whole meaning of the life of this newborn king. The gold, representing wealth and royalty, was the sign that he was a king. The frankincense—incense that was burned daily in the temple in Jerusalem as a holy offering to God—was the sign that he was holy. And the

myrrh, a bitter spice used to wrap the bodies of the dead, was the sign that, royal and holy though he was, he would die. And die to redeem us.

You've probably heard the names of these three Magi: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. But you may have noticed, as we read today's gospel lesson, that the Bible doesn't mention Caspar or Melchior or Balthasar. Those names date from stories people told about them in the Middle Ages. And I think it's a great thing that the Bible doesn't give these magi or wise men proper given names at all. Because actually, they are us—each and every one of us—the strangers, the Gentiles, permanently committing ourselves to follow Jesus and thereby to become part of the Body of Christ.

Because the Magi appeared at the same time, it's easy to picture them coming from the same place and traveling together. I don't think that's how it happened at all. I think these three wise men, these kings, each came from his own kingdom, saw the star, and followed it. I picture them

coming along different paths that converged just outside of Jerusalem, just before they met together with Herod. And as they traveled down their separate paths, they brought their gifts, but they received gifts as well. Maybe the gift for one of them was to have done something to help someone else along the road—maybe to help a shepherd find a lost lamb—and to realize that going through life waiting for the opportunity to do some great deed wasn't what life is all about. Maybe he learned along the road that a whole life of small kindnesses is really a great thing. Perhaps the gift for another was to learn about seeing the beauty of the earth, the sun and moon, the stars, hills, valleys, the birds and wild animals, crops, bodies of water—really looking at them and seeing them. Perhaps this was something he had never taken the time to do at home as a king and wise man. And maybe the gift for the third was to interact with people, to meet them, to talk with them, to hear their stories in a way he had never done before. Yes, they brought gifts, but their travels to a different place, following that star, gave them the time and space to recognize gifts from God—the importance of

small kindnesses, the importance of recognizing the beauty in God's creation and the importance of interpersonal relationships. They each came home richer than when they started on their journeys.

When you think about today's gospel lesson, alongside the season of the year, the full impact of the Epiphany start to become evident. Only a few weeks ago we experienced the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice; and now more light and a longer day comes with each new dawn. Webster defines epiphany as the revealing of Jesus as Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi, but goes on to include additional definitions of "to show forth, to manifest" and "a moment of sudden intuitive understanding; a flash of insight". The point of the Epiphany story is to show that Jesus is the light of the world. We use light as a symbol in ceremonies and liturgies to signify this light in God's world. We see it each Sunday in the candles at the altar. We see it in the flames of the candles in our Advent arrangement. We saw it Christmas Eve when we all held our candles and sang

Silent Night at the end of the service. We'll see it next week as we light the paschal candle. Following Jesus really does illuminate the way for us. The prophet Isaiah said it well, "Lift up your eyes and look around".

The Epiphany is more than just a day, it's really a season. Because Easter is a movable feast, the number of Sundays in the Epiphany season varies from year to year. This year there are six Sundays leading us right up to the start of Lent. Through centuries of tradition, Epiphany has been the season to remember and celebrate the mission of the church as it spreads throughout the world. If we believe that Jesus is the Light of the World then it just makes sense for Jesus to put a spotlight on the injustices suffered by the poor and needy.

I'm reminded of some of the ways that Jesus calls us right here at Holy Faith and how we're answering that call. Think about it—I'm so proud that we are an Angel Food Ministries site. We raised a garden and donated the produce to provide more nutrition to those in need. We

bring food and paper products for our Saline Area Social Services donation box. Some of us knit and crochet scarves to the homeless and little hats for premies. We identify a special cause each month and provide some financial support. Some of us are involved in Christian education for children or adults. Some of us visit folks who are shut in or in the hospital. Individually maybe some of these things don't seem huge but think about it. Each of these things is a light and a beacon to each other and to the world. It's a light to guide us down a path of following Jesus and living in ways that truly demonstrate that we are part of the Body of Christ.

Our baptismal covenant, which we'll all say together next Sunday, reminds us that we are to "seek and serve Christ in all persons", loving our neighbor as ourselves. Christ is with us today, just as he was in that humble stable a couple of millennia ago. Christ is there to be discovered by those of us who, like the Magi, are willing to journey from the known and safe and commonplace to discover God in places others refuse to enter. Like the Three Wise Men we

need to be willing to leave the comfort of our preconceptions and prejudices. The Magi brought their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. But each of us has a precious gift to give, too. It is the gift of ourselves as we encounter Christ alive and present in the poor, the sick, the needy, the elderly, children and all of the vulnerable and defenseless people in the world—both far away and right here at home. Maybe we give this gift of ourselves in a donation to Saline Area Social Services or the Heifer Project; maybe we give it when we visit a shut-in; and maybe we give it when we are really and truly present with and for another person, showing that we have some understanding of what it means to “seek and serve Christ in all persons”.

This Epiphany season is a time to commit ourselves to communication and identity and relationships and to be part of spreading the light, the Good News, throughout the earth. The Magi worshipped at the manger and then carried the Light of Christ out into the world with them, as they returned to their homes. We’re called to do that, too.

We're called to move steadily into the world, bearing the Light of Christ—to the places where we work, the places we study, the places we play, the places we encounter any of God's children. And we're called always to welcome all who come to share in the light.

And together we can all say, Amen.