

1.6.2021 Epiphany of Our Lord

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

“All Share in the Promise of Christ”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

Thank you for joining us on the Epiphany of Our Lord. We celebrate the festival of Epiphany as both the conclusion of the Christmas narrative and the turning point, the hinge upon which the good news turns, opening the door of salvation for all nations and peoples.

Through the wise men, the Magi, we see ourselves and all nations, because we are “the Gentiles” that Paul writes of in his letter to the Ephesians. Paul writes that the mystery of Christ has been revealed to “*the Gentiles (who) have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*” Christ Jesus was born for you and for me. Jesus was born for all nations and peoples.

Tonight, as we decorate our sanctuary with the flags of many nations, we celebrate that all nations and peoples share in the promise of Christ. These flags are a symbolic reminder that Jesus was born, died and was raised for you and for me - for the people of all nations.

When the Magi traveled to find Jesus and worship him, none of these flags was in use, and none of today’s modern nation states yet existed. Though empires and nations have come and gone, we continue to worship Christ as king of the Jews and king of all nations. There is something here for us to learn: human leaders come and go and human institutions are not eternal. Only in Christ Jesus do we see the eternal plan of God for the sisterhood and brotherhood all humanity. On Epiphany we celebrate the only kingdom that lasts, the kingdom of God. Christ’s body the church always points beyond itself to God’s eternal kingdom comprising all peoples. These flags are a reminder that nations must use their gifts to point to something beyond themselves, to the compassionate and liberating reign of the kingdom of God.

There is perhaps no better example of the temporal and fleeting nature of human power than King Herod in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew tells us when King Herod heard the wise men in search of a child who had been born king of the Jews, “*he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.*” King Herod was afraid of losing his power and authority to a new king and leader. Matthew writes that “all Jerusalem” was also frightened, because they, too, had set their hopes on King Herod. They could not imagine the blessing and peace that the new king and kingdom of Jesus could give them.

The religious leaders, too, that King Herod called upon had plenty of information about the birth

of the Messiah and even knew where he was to be born, yet they made no effort to go with the wise men to look for Jesus. We can only imagine that they, too, had placed their hopes upon King Herod rather than upon the new kingdom of grace and peace that is Christ Jesus. Matthew shows us that King Herod knew the politics of power, meeting secretly with the wise men attempting to use them so that he might block the reign Jesus' kingdom of peace and love from coming into the world.

We can only suppose that the wise men went to Jerusalem because they thought King Herod would have helpful knowledge about the new king. It is fascinating is that the star that led the Magi must not have been visible in Jerusalem. Because after the Magi left Herod, Matthew writes, "*there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising.*" The star seems to have reappeared to the Magi once they departed Jerusalem, but the star and its light did not shine for Herod, Jerusalem and the religious elite. God chose to lead foreigners, Gentiles, to the Christ child, making it clear that Jesus is the light of the world, of all peoples and of all nations.

Sometimes we notice things that others do not see, and sometimes others have insight into things that we do not see. When I was a parish pastor of a Japanese congregation, I remember leading a Bible study during the week of Epiphany. We were reading Matthew's gospel text in Japanese and one of the members of the study group said, "If the wise men came from the East, that means they came from somewhere in Asia." I was surprised by the obvious truth contained in what this person said: God had revealed the announcement of the good news to the nations through the Magi who had traveled from Asia, perhaps Persia, toward Jerusalem. This realization helped everyone, including the pastor, realize that the holy star and the light of God's grace had shone over Asia long before missionaries from Europe or the Americas had ever traveled there. The realization helped us see that *God's mission plan* unfolds ahead of us creating mission and drawing us in. We do not create the mission of God; rather, God's mission to the nations draws us in to participate.

Such moments of insight explode our view of Christianity as a "western" religion and something we control, enabling us to see that the good news of the Christian church is God's revelation of Christ for all nations and peoples. This good news had been anticipated by prophets such as Isaiah, who wrote, "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*" In the wise men we see the nations of the world being drawn into the light and the mission of God's grace as Christ's salvation dawned upon the world.

The flags represented in tonight's service are a colorful symbol pointing to the reality Jesus' presence *in every culture, language and nation*. Yet these flags also serve as a painful reminder that

since his birth, nations have also sought to usurp the kingship of Christ, and that leaders have sought to place their own personal interests ahead of God's interests in the world.

These flags are a powerful reminder that God's grace has dawned and continues to dawn upon all nations. What matters is how we choose to follow and make use of the gift of God's living Word, Christ Jesus. Do we seek to follow the light of Christ Jesus, or do we seek, as King Herod mistakenly did, to usurp the kingdom of Jesus through violence and the murder of the innocents?

As Christians, we cannot celebrate the Magi and their worship of Jesus without first struggling with how the kingdoms of this world have resisted, as Herod did, the kingship of Jesus. On Epiphany, we cannot lay our gifts at Jesus' manger without first confessing that the church in its history has also resisted following the light of Christ in discipleship and service to the nations. We cannot lay our gifts at Jesus' manger without remembering that, though the early church was oppressed by Herod and the Roman Empire, the church also became a part of the Empire, enabling and participating in the oppression of other nations. We know our own colonial history of the West only too well: we have been intolerant of other nations, religions, and even of other Christian sisters, brothers and denominations. Our ancestors and their histories bear witness to churches, nations and people who did not follow the light of Christ; but rather, persecuted and killed their neighbors and fellow countrymen because of ethnic hatred, theological difference, and political rivalry.

We cannot kneel with the Magi at the manger without asking ourselves if we are prepared to accept Jesus' invitation to deny ourselves and follow him. We cannot kneel with the Magi at the manger unless we remember that *we have died and been raised in baptism* to walk in the light, to follow the Star of Christ all of our lives.

Tonight in the Confession and Forgiveness, we said to God, "We confess that we have sinned against you and our neighbors. We have turned away from your invitation to new life. We have turned away from the lowly and downtrodden. In your abundant mercy, forgive us our sins..."

When the Magi knelt before Jesus, they were recognizing the kingship of Jesus in their lives, not knowing what their future journey would look like or how Jesus might change them. They were placing Christ Jesus above King Herod and above the country to which Matthew says they returned "by another road."

Matthew's phrase "by another road" suggests that in meeting the Messiah, the wise men had received insight allowing them to travel with new self-knowledge and in new directions. Kneeling

before Jesus had changed them. They returned to their familiar homeland and country, but they had been changed.

T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Journey of the Magi," describes such personal change. In this poem, years after traveling to Bethlehem, one of the Magi recalls his journey - not only what happened on the journey, but more importantly what had happened within him. This wise man said that in Christ he had certainly witnessed a birth but that it was "hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." Looking back years later, the wise man realized that in kneeling to worship Jesus, he had been changed. He had died to his old self. There was no going back to his home country by the same road. He now traveled in life "by another road" led by the Savior whose star he had followed.

Tonight we gather in this beautiful sacred space surrounded by Christmas decorations that will be soon carefully put away until next Advent and Christmas. We will roll up the flags of the nations until next Epiphany. We will hear the parting melodies of "Best and Brightest of the Stars" and "O Morning Star, How Fair and Bright." We will reluctantly leave this season of light and hope and journey into the New Year back to our country with its daily problems and responsibilities, its challenges and strife, and to an ongoing pandemic.

The day of Epiphany encourages each of us to continue our journeys "by another road." We are invited to travel a road upon which Christ Jesus now walks with us as his disciples. It is a road upon which we are joined by disciples of all peoples and nations. This road does not lead to only one nation; the road of Christ leads us, and all nations, to the kingdom of God.

At Epiphany we realize that in kneeling to worship Jesus, we too must die to sin and our old selves, so that we might be raised to new life in Christ. At Epiphany we realize in kneeling before Christ, we are continually changed and there can be no business as usual. New life in Christ makes us citizens of the world in Christ. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, we have now "*become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus.*"

Like the wise men, on Epiphany we walk away changed and transformed by grace becoming wiser people. We are no longer fully at ease in this world, because we have glimpsed Christ and his kingdom of all nations, and we long for the day when we will be raised with Christ in his kingdom.

Kneeling with the Magi, we die to our past, its sins and regrets, so that raised with Christ we live with hope for today and tomorrow. With all nations, we are members of Christ's body and heirs of Christ's promise "to all peoples." Amen.