

1.6.2023 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

“They offered him gifts”

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

Blessed Epiphany greetings. Today marks the end of the season of Christmas and the beginning of a new season celebrating the Epiphany of Christ to all nations and people. In celebrating Epiphany, we are also standing in the shadow of the ancient church. Epiphany allows us to glimpse how early Christians celebrated the meaning and significance of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The celebration of Epiphany reaches back to a time even before the establishment of a date for Christmas. Originally, January 6 was the date upon which the visit of the Magi was commemorated along with Jesus’ birth and Jesus’ baptism. As early as the year 200, January 6th was identified as one possible date for the baptism of Jesus. This was well in advance of establishing December 25th as the date for Christmas.

What is so compelling about Epiphany is that early Christians seemed just as concerned about the date of Jesus’ baptism as about the date of his birth. In other words, after Easter, Epiphany is thought to be the second oldest festival of the church. Though we will never have complete clarity about the emergence of festivals in the early church, what seems clear is that Epiphany comprised several concepts at the same time; namely, the visit of the Magi, Jesus’ nativity, Jesus’ baptism, and the announcement to the nations that a Savior dwells in our humanity.

The significance of these several themes is that early Christians, like us today, sought to understand the meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. His birth was linked to an announcement of salvation for the nations; it was linked to Holy Baptism as the means of salvation; it was linked to the incarnation of Christ as salvation dwelling in our very humanity; and it was linked to Jesus’ ministry and his call to become disciples.

For us, as modern people seeking to understand the significance of the incarnation in the modern world, the season of Epiphany continues to offer a window with a view upon our identity as Christians. In two days, on Sunday January 8, we will celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. Then, throughout the season of Epiphany, we will celebrate Jesus’ calling of his first disciples, the good news of the Sermon on the Mount, and then on Transfiguration Sunday, we will see the divinity of Christ revealed in his humanity on the holy mountain. The season of Epiphany is a tour de force of the meaning and work of Christ, who continues to call us to follow him.

This evening, we celebrate the Epiphany, or manifestation of Christ Jesus, to the Magi. The significance of Epiphany is that the Messiah is born for all people and nations. Today's text from Isaiah reads, "*Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you.*" The prophet Isaiah awaited the Epiphany of a Savior who would be the light of the world. The Magi represent all the world beyond Israel, and the Magi mark the beginning of a new covenant with all nations and people.

Paul explained this to the Ephesians, writing, "*the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" In other words, this is why we, non-Jewish people, are included in the promise of the Messiah – he comes for all nations and people. Indeed, this is why we decorate our sanctuary with the flags of many countries, meant to represent all nations and people.

Traditionally, today is also often called "Three Kings Day" and "Little Christmas" – names that point to various traditions celebrating of the Epiphany of Christ to the Magi, who offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The Magi and their gifts are also certainly evocative of the Book of Revelation, chapter 21, of a time we still look forward to, when the nations will enter the new Jerusalem bearing their gifts. These flags don't simply represent modern governments; rather, they represent, in the purest sense, people and the gifts of their cultures around the world. These flags remind us that Christ continues to speak to all people through their diverse languages and cultures so that God's love for this world might be made known through them.

Therefore, Epiphany reminds us that our celebration of Christ's birth is not about the gifts we give to one another; it is about what gift we will offer to Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. In the gospel reading, we see very clearly that King Herod and the people of Jerusalem were filled with fear rather than joy at the birth of the Messiah. They feared that the Messiah would shake things up. Perhaps Herod feared being deposed and losing political power. And so, King Herod met, not openly but secretly, with the Magi so that he alone could attempt to handle the situation, disposing of the child and protecting his political life. Herod was not concerned about offering a gift to the Messiah; rather, he is a lesson about leaders seeking to be served rather than serving others.

Indeed, the Messiah was born to shake things up. The prophet Haggai wrote, "*I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts*" (Haggai 2:7). And so, the Magi traveled from nations far away from Bethlehem by faith in the leading of a star, offering their gifts to Jesus so that the splendor of the Messiah

might be revealed.

We still live in a world in need of a Savior, a world in which the nations might offer their gifts to Christ rather than sending their weapons against one another. On Epiphany we remember God's eternal love for this world and its people. Paul addressed this theme to the Ephesians, writing, *"through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

We continue to celebrate the Epiphany of Jesus Christ as the Messiah to the nations because new life in Christ is God's eternal purpose for the world. God loves this world and its people. When will we finally and fully listen to him and cease our conflict and wars with one another?

"They offered him gifts." Epiphany leaves us with a question: "What gift will I offer to Jesus?" The most precious gift each of us has is our lives. Imagine this world, if each person would simply offer their neighbor the gift of their life.

The Magi traveled a great distance at the risk of their lives to offer him their gifts. Their witness invites us to offer our gifts, risking all for Christ and our neighbor. Amen.