

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EPIPHANY

Our text is the Gospel for today. From the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew we listen again to verses 1 & 2.

*<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

With the familiar account of the wise men visiting the young child Jesus, we celebrate the Festival of The Epiphany of our Lord and we begin the Epiphany Season. Epiphany is a word that is used to describe a manifestation, an appearance, or a revelation. During the Epiphany Season, we see how Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, was revealed, on many occasions, to be the Messiah, the divine Son of God and Savior of the world.

Today we see how Jesus was revealed to be the promised Messiah to the Gentile Magi from the east and we learn why that event is important for you today in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. The account of the visit of the Magi is crucial because it reveals to us:

1. The Savior Came as Promised and
2. The Savior Came for All.

The information about this famous visit is tantalizingly brief. The account occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew and it leaves many questions unanswered. To complicate matters, over the centuries many legends and fables and erroneous assumptions have been incorporated into the narrative of the visit of the Magi to Jesus. For instance, there is the widely accepted idea that there were three Magi. This comes from Matthew's mentioning of three gifts, gold, incense and myrrh. In truth, we don't know how many Magi came to visit Jesus. There were at least two and maybe many more. Another misconception is seen in the depiction of the Magi worshipping the baby Jesus along with the shepherds in Bethlehem's stable. Luke's Gospel tells us that the shepherds visited the baby Jesus on the night of his birth. Matthew's account tells us that, by the time the Magi reached the city of David, Jesus, Joseph and Mary were living in a house and no longer in the stable where Jesus was born.

What we do know is that the Magi were a class of people who existed for centuries in what is now Iran and Iraq. They were associated with the Medes and Persians and later with the Parthians. The Magi were an educated class of people, very learned. They were involved in politics and political intrigues. They were king-makers. They were involved in religion, in sacrifices and divinations. They collected and studied the writings of all the religious systems of their day. And they were involved in the sciences, in chemistry, mathematics and astronomy.

During the Babylonian Captivity of the Jewish nation, about 600 B.C., the young captive Daniel was appointed head over the Magi even though he was not part of their hereditary succession. (Daniel 2:48). Through the influence of Daniel and other Jewish captives, the Babylonian Magi heard the prophecies that a Messiah would come from the nation of Israel. They were probably familiar with the Books of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. In one of those books, Numbers, Balaam the soothsayer is recorded as prophesying:

*"A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel . . . A ruler will come out of Jacob."*  
(Numbers 24:17-19).

From the time of Daniel until the time of Jesus, it was the Magi and the Jewish people who chose to remain behind in Babylon who kept contact with Israel. We know from recorded history that several times they joined together in an alliance to fight their common foe, Rome. And so with this background, it is understandable that God would choose to inform the Magi of Babylon about the birth of his son. And inform them he did - in a special way - with a star. In his own way, God used a special star to let these wise men know that a special king had been born. Remember, it was the Lord of the universe who was in control of this situation. Since their creation, all the stars, all the planets, all the galaxies have served his purpose, and they will continue to do so until they cease to exist.

In the current best-seller *Killing Jesus - A History*, the author mentions an article published in the Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society in 1991 (vol. 32, pp. 389-407). The paper details the records of Chinese astronomers who, in 5 B.C., observed a long-tailed, slow moving comet which seemed to “hang” in the constellation Capricorn for 70 days. The author imparts that the same comet would not only have been visible in the night sky in Persia, but due to the movement of the earth, it would appear to be “in front of” anyone traveling westward from Babylon. Could this have been the star that guided the Magi? We just don’t know.

Was the star a natural phenomenon, a comet or a supernova or the convergence of several planets? Or was it a supernatural phenomenon? Were the Magi the only ones who could see it or was it visible to all? What did it look like? How did it move? How did it specifically indicate the place where Jesus and his parents were staying? These questions are unanswered in scripture.

But the Magi knew exactly what this phenomenon was and what it meant. From their observatories in Babylon they didn’t just see an unusual heavenly body, they saw HIS STAR in the sky. It told them clearly, somehow, that the king, the DIVINE King, had been born among the Jewish people. And so they set out on the long, arduous trip to Judea. When they got to Judea, they went to the capital city, Jerusalem. When they got to Jerusalem they went to the palace of King Herod the Great. Where else would you go to find the newly born king of the Jews?

Herod and the religious leaders knew exactly whom the Magi were asking to see, the Messiah promised of old. They must have thought to themselves, “How did these Magi hear that the Messiah ‘has been born’? Nobody’s said anything about this birth to us! Now, here are these ‘foreigners’ and they’re asking to see the Messiah because they want to worship him. What’s going on?”

The religious leaders in Jerusalem knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born. From the prophet Micah they read: “*Bethlehem in the land of Judah.*” So Herod sent the Magi out of Jerusalem, south to the little town of Bethlehem. That night the star reappeared to the Magi. The same star they had seen in the east led them to Bethlehem, and somehow to the very house where Mary and Joseph were now living. They entered the house, saw the child, the one for whom they had traveled so far, and they bowed down and worshiped him. They worshiped him as King, as Lord, as Savior.

Why is this incident so important that it is reported in the pages of Holy Scripture? First of all it gives us evidence that the Savior actually came to earth as promised, that our God is a God who keeps his promises. From the time mankind fell into sin, the incident with Adam and Eve right up to Christmas Eve, God had, for thousands of years, continuously repeated the promise of a savior from sin. That promised savior was the young child whom the Magi worshiped. This is an historical fact. It took place at the time of King Herod, a real figure whom we know about apart from scripture. And it happened in a real place, the Roman province of Syria, the country of Judea, the town of Bethlehem. This account establishes the historicity of the incident.

In addition, this visit is reported for you and me because it shows the fulfillment of prophecy. Just think back to the words of Isaiah 60 which were our Old Testament reading today. *Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn . . . bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.* This was but one of a multitude of prophecies about the coming messiah which were fulfilled in the birth, life, death and resurrection of this very same Jesus.

Secondly, this incident is important because it shows that the Savior came for all. Even though the Magi are obscure figures, we don't know how many there were, we don't know their names, we don't hear about them ever again in the Bible. But we do know one important fact. The Magi were foreigners. They were not of the nation of Israel. They were Gentiles. Remember the angels' message to the shepherds on Christmas Eve? *I bring you good news of great joy which will be for ALL people.* ALL people. The baby of Bethlehem was born not just for the nation of Israel but for all people. The faithful believer Simeon who earlier had held the baby Jesus rejoiced and said, *"My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of **all people**, a light for revelation to the **Gentiles** . . ."*

The Magi were Gentiles, they traveled those many miles for one purpose, to worship the Christ, the promised Savior. They were the first Gentiles to bow the knee before Jesus. But they weren't the last. As the Apostle Paul related in our second reading today, he needed a special revelation from God to realize that *"Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."* The young child Jesus meant salvation not only for believers within the nation of Israel but also for the Magi and for all the rest of us Gentiles who come to faith through the working of the Holy Spirit.

While we recount the visit of the Magi today, we're not here to focus so much on them, but on the child they came to worship. You see, that child didn't just take his gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh, and live happily ever after. He fled with his parents to Egypt when Herod tried to kill him. Then the child Jesus went to Nazareth where Mary and Joseph raised him. As the prophets foretold, this Jesus grew up and began establishing his kingdom of faith in the hearts of believers. He lived a blameless, holy life, something we could never do on our own. He was a king all right, but he wore a crown only once. It was a crown of thorns and it was part of his torture, a torture he endured for us. Bearing our sins, the sins of the whole world, Jesus died as the sacrifice needed to pay for sin in full. When Jesus rose from death on Easter, he gave proof that sin, death and the devil were defeated and his work of salvation was completed. Now we Gentiles who believe in Jesus, we are reconciled, we are made at peace with God.

In one sense, you could say that we are walking the way of the Magi. After all, that's what you're doing here this morning. You're here to do what the Magi did, worship Christ the Lord. You don't see a little child, but through the eyes of faith, you know that your Savior Jesus, is present with you through Word and Sacrament today, just as he was present with those Magi so long ago. And while you have gifts to offer, be it financial gifts or the giving of your time and talents in service to him, he has even better gifts to give to you, gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, gifts that beat gold, incense, and myrrh any day of the week!

Just as God revealed the identity of the Christ child and his location to those Magi through his Word, today he reveals Christ Jesus and what he has done for you through the preaching of his Word. Without Jesus there is no hope, no light, no life. With him there is joy and there is peace in this life and an eternity with him in heaven. So many people today need to know Jesus. Your support of this congregation allows us, in turn, to support the home mission and world mission endeavors of our larger church body which spreads the message of salvation across this country and around the world. By your life as a child of God, by your public walk with Christ, his light shines into a sin-darkened world. By your words of witness, the simple sharing of your faith, his message is conveyed to those

who need to know him. Like that star of old, you can point others to the Christ child, so that they too may come and worship him. Amen.