

Blessed to Be a Blessing

The Epiphany of Our Lord

Text: Matthew 2:1–12

January 6, 2008

Mystery Unveiled

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany.

This is one of the most significant days of the Church Year—
it is the day we celebrate
the arrival of the Wise Men
who make the long and arduous journey from Persia to Bethlehem
to pay homage to the Christ-child,
the new-born king of Israel.

And yet, so often this special day goes unnoticed by many Christians.
It goes uncelebrated in many churches because
Epiphany Day always falls on January 6th, which is seldom a Sunday.
That omission is unfortunate because when we fail to celebrate Epiphany,
we miss its profound message for our lives—
we miss its profound proclamation and pageantry.

Epiphany is derived from the
Greek word *επιφάνεια* (*epiphaneia*)
which means *appearance* or *manifestation*.

We call this day the Feast of the Epiphany because the Star of Bethlehem
appears before the Wise Men in the night sky
leading them to the Christ-child
who is *manifested* or *made known* as the *king of the Jews*.
With the arrival of the Magi, the 12 days of the Christmas cycle
comes to an end.

Interestingly,
Matthew never tells us how many Wise Men there are—
much less give them names.

The assumption that there were three Magi
comes from the three gifts that are offered to the child:
gold, frankincense and myrrh.
The names ascribed to them: Melchior, Balthazar and Kaspar,
come from lore
not from scripture.

The point Matthew is making with this story is not the names and number of the Magi
but the proclamation of the good news to the world that
Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, is the Lord of the nations.

While Christians in the West
mark December 25th, Christmas Day
as the occasion for our major celebration of the birth of our Lord,
Christians in the East
mark today, the Feast of the Epiphany,
as their major celebration of the Nativity.

The Eastern celebration is actually
 more in keeping with the
 message of the gospels.
 God's redemptive work begins with Israel
 and, through Christ, moves out to the Gentiles.
 Epiphany is, indeed, *our* Christmas.

We come to Jesus not as Jews—
 we come to the manger not to worship him
 as the Messiah of Israel—
 we come as Gentiles—
 we come to the manger to worship him
 as the Lord and Savior of the nations.

In the arrival of the Magi,
 Matthew is proclaiming to the world that Jesus, the Messiah of Israel,
 is the Lord and Savior of the nations.

That is a bold proclamation
 given the humble surroundings of Jesus' birth—
 not just the stable and the manger,
 but Judea.

We would expect such an important king to be found
 at or near the center of power—in Rome or Greece—not Judea—
 and we would expect him to be from a royal bloodline
 more significant and formidable than the House of David.

But God has strange ways of doing things.
 God is always going against the norms of worldly wisdom—
 to accomplish his purposes
 in the world...and in our lives.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot to death in Memphis, Tennessee,
 the next edition the local newspaper urged the clergy of the city to gather for
 a meeting to address the tragedy and stave off any further acts of violence.

After a time of Bible study, prayer, and speaking,
 the clergy decided to march *en masse* to the Mayor's office
 as a symbol of love and reconciliation.
 They wanted the Mayor to reconsider his opposition
 to the striking sanitation workers as a symbol of
 the city's repentance for the assassination of a man of peace.

After leaving the sanctuary, they lined up two abreast
 and started walking toward City Hall.
 Just before they had completed one block of their march,
 a young deacon from St. Mary's Episcopal Church, where they had met,
 ran back into the church
 and brought out the processional cross to lead the way.

With humility and yet boldness, he put himself at the head of the procession.
 As the pastors walked,
 television cameras descended upon them.
 Reporters from New York to California started asking them questions
 about their motives
 and about how they felt about what had happened the night before.

When their journey was about half completed,
 an older woman started yelling at them
 from a second floor apartment window.
 As they drew closer to her window, they could hear the anger of her shrill voice:
The cross belongs in the church! The cross belongs in the church!
Take the cross back to the church where it belongs.

Take the cross back to the church where it belongs.

When Gerald Kennedy was a Methodist Bishop of Southern California,
 he sent a pastoral letter to all the churches and pastors of his conference.

In the letter, he wrote about an experience he had in downtown Los Angeles
 seeing a very poorly dressed woman and her young daughter looking at
 a beautifully decorated display window in a department store.
 In the window was the manger scene, but in this particular nativity,
 Mary was dressed not as a humble maiden
 but as the Queen of Heaven.

Rich diamonds and other jewels adorned Mary's dazzling crown.
 The little girl gazed at the display for a while,
 and then turned to her mother and said,
She's so beautiful!
I bet she never had any troubles like we do,
did she?

Bishop Kennedy then added this comment,
Let nobody in your church ever think that Jesus Christ was
divorced from the world of trouble and pain.
 The Gospel truth is that Jesus
 came among us to share
 every experience of our common life.

On this Epiphany Day, a bold message is proclaimed to you and me:
 the baby born in the stable in Bethlehem and placed in the manger
 is the Lord of the nations—
 the Lord of all people.
 But even more,
 he is your Lord—
 and my Lord.

As he grows in years, we will see the power of God at work in him
 proclaiming the presence of the kingdom of God in our midst
 and doing the work of redemption on the cross.

Today in this Feast of the Epiphany,
a divine mystery and profound truth about Jesus
is revealed to you
and revealed to me—

- in his deep humility is the mighty power of God,
- in his brokenness is our healing,
- in his rejection by humanity is our acceptance by God,
- and in his death is our life.