

The Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2021

The Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6
 Psalm 72:1-11
 Ephesians 3:1-12
 Matthew 2:1-12

The Hymns: # 397 (1,2,4) *As With Gladness Men of Old*
 # 396 (1,2,5) *Arise and Shine in Splendor*
 # 399 (1,2,5) *The Star Proclaims the King is Here*

The Collect: O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reign with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

The Sermon:
 The Three Mysteries of the Epiphany
 Matthew 2:1-12

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?’”

Dear Friends in Christ,

Tonight we celebrate the visit of the Magi to the Child Jesus in Bethlehem.

There are three mysteries in the story of the Magi. First, what was the star of Bethlehem? The star guided the Magi to Bethlehem. But which star? Several theories have been advanced to explain the star of Bethlehem as a natural phenomenon. Some people say that the star was a comet or meteor, because the text implies movement. "Behold, the star that they had seen in the east went before them, until it came and stopped over where the child was." But, look, this is not the behavior of a comet or meteor, because they do not stop over a place on earth.

Perhaps the best of these theories is that of Johann Kepler, a seventeenth-century astronomer. Kepler was a Lutheran, who had once studied to be a pastor. In his work as an astronomer, Kepler found evidence in the ideas of Nicholas Copernicus, who proposed the earth, the moon and other planets revolve around the sun -- not the sun, the moon and the planets revolve around the earth. This was a revolutionary concept at the time. Regarding the star of Bethlehem, Kepler proposed that it was an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn in the year of Jesus' birth, to form a bright light in the heavens. We've just seen this same alignment in the recent excitement about the "Christmas Star". According to the symbolism of the ancient Middle East, Jupiter, the greatest of the planets, was the king of the planets. Saturn was linked with the Jews. Then, the alignment indicated the birth of the promised King of the Jews, that is, the Messiah.

The other alternative is that the star was a miracle of God, who can use natural phenomena, but can also suspend natural laws. Whatever the nature of the star, whether it was a natural or supernatural phenomenon, we believe it was God's guiding light to Him who is the true Light of the World.

The second mystery is the Magicians themselves. Who were they? Only the Gospel according to St. Matthew speaks of the Magi. "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, behold, some Magi came from the east to Jerusalem." In many Christian artworks, the Magi are represented as being of the three races: African, European and Asian, because the land of Palestine is at the crossroads between Africa, Europe and Asia. In this way art communicates that the Epiphany was the appearance of the Child Jesus to people of all nations. First, the humble of Israel. Then, the kings of the world.

In the pictures of Christmas, there are always three Magi, because their gifts were three: gold, frankincense and myrrh. But in the text, we do not find a specific number. The word, "magician", is from the root of this word, Magi. But in the beginning, the Magi were not magicians, but a caste of priests in Persia and Mesopotamia. They were students of the stars and medicine. In time, they became advisors to the kings of Persia and Mesopotamia, the countries to the east of Palestine known today as Iran and Iraq.

We find the word for Magi in the second chapter of the book of the prophet Daniel. After the interpretation of a dream of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Daniel, was appointed governor of the whole province of Babylon, and prince of the governors over all the wise men (magi) of Babylon. Because of Daniel and the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, the Magi knew something of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. In particular, they may have well known the ancient prophecy in Numbers 24:17: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel". And therefore, the Magi traveled to Jerusalem to look for the Child Jesus.

The Baby Jesus is the third mystery in the story. The Magi found Him, not in Jerusalem, but in a house in Bethlehem. They did not arrive on Christmas Eve with the shepherds. A choir of angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, while the star was the sign for the Magi. The trip of the Magi to Bethlehem lasted more than a year. How do we know this?

Because the Magi came first to Jerusalem, where they were asked, "Where is the King of the Jews, who has been born? Because of His star that we have seen in the east, we have come to worship Him."

However, there was already a king in Palestine, he was called Herod the Great. "When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when all the chief priests and the scribes of the people had been summoned, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. And they said to him, In Bethlehem of Judea; for thus it is written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, from the land of Judah, you are not very small among the princes of Judah; for out of you will come a guide, who will shepherd my people Israel. Then Herod, secretly calling the magicians, inquired of them diligently the time of the appearance of the star; And sending them to Bethlehem, he said: Go there, and ask diligently for the child; and after you find him, let me know, so that I too may go and adore him. "

But, this was a lie; Herod's plan was to kill the Child Jesus – the supposed king who would usurp Herod's rule. The Magi did not return to Herod because of a warning from an angel. So, Herod knew that Bethlehem was the town where the Child Jesus was born, but he did not know which child in which house. Therefore, he ordered the slaughter of all the boys in Bethlehem of two years of age or less. We remember this event on the Day of the Innocents, December 28.

We know that this Child who avoided the evil intentions of King Herod is the greatest mystery in history.

He is the Word made flesh that lived among us. As St. John says in his Gospel, this Word was in the beginning with God and the Word was God. God's Voice, God's Word. Through Him everything was made; for Him everything was made. But, in the fullness of time He was made flesh, born of the Virgin Mary. He grew up as the son of Mary and Joseph the carpenter. He was baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist and thus began His public ministry, the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins by the blood of the Savior. He shed that blood on Calvary when He died for the atonement of all sins, but was raised to life on the third day. We are all sinners and cannot justify ourselves before God. We have the promise of eternal life because of Jesus Christ.

How was the eternal Son of God made flesh? We cannot understand this mystery. This greatest mystery is also the most precious gift for us. The Magi offered the Child Jesus as gifts, gold, incense and myrrh. The value of gold is obvious. Today, nations throughout the world base their economies on gold reserves in their coffers. Gold was truly a gift for a king. Incense was burned for its fragrance in the presence of a king, also in the temple in the worship of God. So, the incense was a gift for a king, but also for a priest. We believe in Jesus as King of kings and our High Priest in heaven, the only Mediator between God and men. Myrrh was used as oil to anoint kings, prophets and priests, also to preserve the bodies of the deceased. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and following His crucifixion, He was anointed for burial.

Most precious of all these gifts was the Child Jesus Himself who brought us God's forgiveness and eternal life. Not only for us. Epiphany means the manifestation of God in Christ, and the visit of the Magi was the first manifestation of the Savior to all nations. The Magi were foreigners, they were not men of Israel. But the Savior's promise was made to all nations.

Jesus came first to the Jews, according to the promise that God made to Abraham and the patriarchs. But after his resurrection, He sent his church to proclaim the gospel to all parts of the world. St. Paul says in our epistle ([Ephesians 3: 1-12](#)), "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace is given to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

Furthermore, "That the manifold wisdom of God may be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places." Like all those who have received the new life in baptism, we are the church. Therefore, we also have the mission to share the good news of Christ with others. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can talk with our family and neighbors about what Christ has done for us. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.