

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

by Rev. Emily Chapman

January 3, 2010

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



ST. PAUL'S

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Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psallm 72:17, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Ephesians 3:1-12

³This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles – ²for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, ³and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, ⁴a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. ⁵In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: ⁶that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ⁷Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. ⁸Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; ¹⁰so that 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. ¹¹This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, ¹²in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Matthew 2:1-12

²In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

I learned about these special visitors the same way most people do — by seeing third-grade boys dressed in bathrobes and cardboard crowns playing them in the Christmas pageant. In the church where I grew up, we even had giant cardboard cut-out camels that had holes for faces cut out of the hump in each one, so a kid was holding the cardboard with his face in the hump, dancing into the church with the wise men, or kings or Magi — whatever we called them at the time, right to the stable where Mary and Joseph and the shepherds are gathered.

Of course, I know now that having the Wise Men share a stage with the shepherds is not particularly accurate according to the Biblical witness. I also know that there may not have been three, maybe more, maybe less, and that we call them so many things — wise men, the three kings, the Magi — because we don’t know too much about who these visitors are, or from where they came to see Jesus. Some say they were kings, most say that they were Persian mystics, or some class of priests. Some trace the Magi back to the Kurds over two millenia ago. Just who are these

Magi? More importantly, what do they reveal to us about Jesus? Clearly, they are significant, and this is a significant day.

While our celebration is nowhere near the level of excitement and ceremony of Christmas, in many churches and traditions, this is among the biggest celebrations of the year, behind only Easter and Pentecost. It is always celebrated on the 12th day after Christmas, so it floats to different days of the week. Some churches mark it in special celebrations on the actual day, January 6, but many now celebrate as we do, on the Sunday closest to the actual day. It's one of only seven major feast days in the Church, and there are variety of commemorations around the world, some religious and some more secular.

In Spain and parts of Latin America, Epiphany is called *Día de los Tres Reyes Magos*, and tradition holds that the three of the kings: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar, representing Europe, Arabia, and Africa, arrived on horse, camel, and elephant, bringing respectively gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus. Children (and many adults) polish and leave their shoes ready for the kings' presents before they go to bed on the eve of January 6. Treats are left for the kings and their animals. In Mexico, it is traditional for children to leave their shoes, along with a letter with toy requests for the Three Kings, by the family nativity scene or by their beds. The shoes may be filled with hay for the animals, so that the kings will be generous with their gifts.

In the Philippines, the Christmas season traditionally ends on this day in which Filipino children also leave their shoes out, so that the Kings would leave behind gifts like candy or money inside. People greet one another with the phrase "Happy Three Kings!" In some locales, there is the practice of having three men, dressed as the *Tatlong Hari*, ride around on horseback, distributing trinkets and candy to the children of the area.

In Ethiopia, they celebrate a bit later, combining Epiphany, as many traditions do, with the Baptism of the Lord celebration, which we will mark next week. There is a representation of the Ark of the Covenant on every altar in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and it is reverently carried to the head priest. There are songs and

dances and much ceremony until nearly 2 a.m., when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated near a stream or pool and the water blessed and sprinkled on the participants as they remember their baptisms.

In Eastern churches, Epiphany is preceded by fasting. The Armenian church fasts for seven days, but for others it's the day before and lasts until the first star is spotted in the night sky. In Ireland, it's called Little Christmas. In France, they eat something like a King Cake that we would have here and in Louisiana for Mardi Gras, where whoever gets the piece with the toy in it is "King for a day." In Belgium, children go out in groups of three (representing the wise men) to their neighbors' homes in a sort of trick or treat style event where they receive candy or coins at each house. In many traditions, the priest or pastor chalks the initials of the wise men on the doors of the church and of homes, blessing them.

Now, those of you who know me and know of my deep love for travel and seeing other cultures aren't incredibly surprised that I am taking you on this little trip around the world. However, I suspect none of you came here for a geography or anthropology lesson. I want us to remember all these various cultures and traditions for a reason, that I believe is one of the answers to my first question: Who are these men, and what do they reveal to us about Jesus?

These men come to Bethlehem by way of Jerusalem, which is set abuzz by their appearance looking for the new king. The presence of these strangers raised Herod's suspicions to the point that he tried to enlist their help in finding this infant king, and when that didn't work, we learn in the few passages after our reading today that he ordered the slaughter of every boy under the age of two in all of Israel. He is terrified, not only that Jesus will be a threat to his power among the Jews, but that he will threaten Rome to such a degree that the government will drop its fist on Herod, removing all his power and considerable wealth.

This is what the story of all these characters shows us about Jesus. Jesus came to change everything. Not just to be King of the Jews, but Jesus' promise and threat is for everyone, even these travelers from a distant land and this pagan king. The text says that Jesus is coming to Shepherd the people, to lead with love and compassion,

for all people, from his own people the Jews, to these foreign magi, to Herod himself, the one who spent his lifetime intent on destroying Jesus. The wise men come to show us that Jesus has come to overturn everything...to bring Good News, to be the Light for ALL the people who have walked in darkness. He came not just to be the King of all nations and peoples, overturning all of our propensities to view one opinion or group of people as God's own, to the exclusion of another group. We are reminded that all people, everywhere are God's own Beloved and now have access to God through Jesus. From his earliest days on earth, Jesus scandalized everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, with his very presence. What's more, we learn that our God who came to be with us welcomes the worship and gifts of all of us – from Texas to Tehran, from Cape Town to Caracas, from Sydney to Shanghai, and everywhere in between.

The lesson of the Wise Men is the same as the one we hear in Ephesians: Jesus reveals “that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”

This Epiphany Sunday we remember that the light that the darkness could not overcome shines on ALL people. “All the peoples of the earth will be blessed in him. Alleluia!” Amen.