

Sermon for the Solemnity of the Epiphany
Sunday, January 6, 2019
“God is here!”

Texts: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

God is here! Today is the Solemnity of the Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Epiphany marks the end of the Christmas Season. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, their celebration of the Epiphany, which they call the Theophany, includes the baptism of Christ by John the Baptist. A theophany is a manifestation or revelation of God in the world, a declaration that God is here among us. Three theophanies mark Epiphanytide: the arrival of the Magi at the crib of the baby Jesus, Baptism of Our Lord which we will celebrate next Sunday, and the first miracle of Jesus at the Wedding at Cana, which we will celebrate in two weeks. Epiphanytide is capped off at the end with yet another epiphany: the story of the Transfiguration.

The story the Epiphany is notable because in it is told of the arrival of the three wise men, or magi, or kings. They traveled from far away to Judea to pay homage to the infant Jesus whom they predicted was a king, because they observed a star “at its rising.” Many English biblical translations say they observed a star “in the east” but in the original Greek, Matthew’s telling of the story says the magi saw the star at its rising in the eastern sky just before dawn. Modern astronomers have tried to figure out what the sky might have looked like on that day and what the magi might have seen. You see, the wise men were astrologers. They read the stars. Over the years, the church’s legend of that visitation by three men to the infant Messiah has led to telling us that they were kings, and perhaps they were kings. But, whoever they were, they were wise and they read the stars. They looked for signs in the stars. But real stars don’t move. Well, they *do*, but very, very, very slowly. Within a human lifetime, the pattern of the stars never changes; in fact, the stars move so slowly that the pattern of the stars has essentially not changed since humans have existed! It probably wasn’t an actual star that led the wise men to Jesus. Some have speculated that what the magi saw was Halley’s Comet, which passes the earth every 76 years, but scientists don’t think it was Halley’s Comet either. What *do* move with regularity are the planets of our solar system. If you study the night sky, you can see their movement happening within a week’s time.

The wise men followed the movement of the planets, and they believed that certain planetary alignments served as portents, or signs, of significant events that were to happen here on earth. Where the Bible tells us that they were observing the eastern sky, they were looking for the reappearing of the planet, the “star” at dawn—that is, the morning star. It is the brief moment when from here on earth we can see the reflection of a planet in the light of the morning sun, just before the light of the sun breaks over the horizon and floods the earth with light, obscuring all of the planets and stars “lesser lights” (as Genesis puts it) until the evening. The planets move relative to earth and to each other, and because we’re all circling around the sun, sometimes the movement of the planets seems to stop. Jupiter, the largest of the planets, is easily visible to the naked eye. In ancient times, Jupiter was considered to predict major events, like the birth of royalty. What the wise men were looking for was just the right alignment when the planet Jupiter stopped to change its direction, and the sun was in a particular sign of the zodiac, along with another particular alignment of the rest of the planets. When that occurred, they knew that a king had been born. That’s what prompted them to set out to find him. “Arise, shine! For your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has dawned upon you. For behold, darkness covers the land; deep gloom enshrouds the peoples. But over you the Lord will rise, and his glory will appear upon you. Nations will stream to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawning.” Those are the opening words of the Old Testament lesson for today by the prophet Isaiah. It was the prophecy that the Hebrews were waiting for to herald the coming of the Messiah.

The wise men went looking for a king, and as we are told the story by Luke, that king was the infant king of Israel, the Messiah. Not surprisingly, they went to the reigning king of Israel, Herod, to inquire, because presumably the new king of Israel would be the son of the current king of Israel. But it was not. And that made Herod and the wise men very curious. It made Herod especially curious, because the prediction of a king that wasn’t his own son meant that his power was in jeopardy—and that was a very bad thing from his perspective. Herod inquired as to when the sign appeared, and given the time it would take for distant travelers to prepare and arrive from so far away wanted the wise men to find the child. (The psalm says they came from Tarshish, Arabia, and Saba, which referred in the ancient world to Spain, Arabia, and the land of Cush near Ethiopia in Africa. Some traditions say one

may have come from as far as India!) Biblical scholars think the journey actually took 1-2 years.

Eventually, the wise men found the infant Jesus, and they fell on their knees and payed homage. Then they each gave him a gift: gold, the symbol of royalty, to symbolize his kingship; frankincense, a symbol of ritual purity, to symbolize his royal and eternal priesthood; and, myrrh, a substance burned along with incense at the time of death, to foreshadow his burial. And when they had finished, they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they left for their own countries “by another road.” Herod wanted to deal with the threat of somebody rising up against him, and church tradition tells us that he decreed that all of the babies of two years of age or less be killed; that event is commemorated on December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

In celebrating the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world—not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles. The arrival of wise men from various parts of the known world meant that the birth of the Messiah, the anointed one, was for the benefit of all people. The story of the Nativity of Jesus Christ is the record of God being born as a man in the midst of the chaos of the world to declare to us that hope exists in a tumultuous world. The Epiphany is the world’s recognition of God’s arrival. Jesus Christ’s first sermon was his first cry at his birth, signifying, “I am here!” The Word has been made flesh and dwells among us. In human flesh 2,019 years ago (give or take a few years) and for us today, in his Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist. And despite all of the chaos that interrupts or consumes our lives from day to day, God’s presence with us keeps us moving forward, gets us back on track, reminds us that in the midst of the troubles of human life, we need not fear. It’s all in God’s hands. God loves us and he has our back.

The Epiphany is about proclamation: proclaiming to the world that God is here. This afternoon after the 11 AM Mass, we will engage in a prayerful walk through the Woodhaven neighborhood. This is our primary mission field, and as the Body of Christ, we want to carry the message that God is here out into the world, bringing the light of Christ and seeing where Christ’s light exists. We will contemplate where the two intersect and how we can participate in making a connection and building important relationships.

We should keep our eyes looking eastward, to the morning star that shines so brightly, to the one who saves us, and that light should burn deeply within us and continue its Epiphany message through us to

proclaim to each other in our church, to this neighborhood, this city, and the world that God indeed is here and dwells among us! Amen.

Resources

“Can astronomy explain the biblical star of Bethlehem?” <http://theconversation.com/can-astronomy-explain-the-biblical-star-of-bethlehem-35126>

Quote by Pope Francis from the sermon preached in the Sistine Chapel on January 8, 2017 for the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. (EWTN live broadcast)