

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

January 9, 2022 – EPIPHANY SUNDAY – YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: *“Only Love Can See the Star”**

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9	(A prophecy that Kings bearing gifts will be drawn to Christ's light)
Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14	(God's kingdom is righteous and everlasting)
Ephesians 3:1-12	(God's grace has been revealed in the coming of Christ)
St. Matthew 2:1-12	(The Wise Men visit the young Jesus and worship Him)

An ancient legend tells how the Wise Men, for a time, lost sight of the Star. They had started out with high resolve, holy purpose, and hopeful expectation. A providential magnetism drew them together on this spiritual quest. Three aspiring souls had found a common kinship and surrendered themselves to a single purpose, to follow where the Star led them. Together, they rode the trackless miles, their hearts beating with the excitement and enchantment of a noble experience.

Their initial travel conversation soon changed from trivialities and social amenities to that vision which kept calling them on, and the mysterious Star which beckoned them forth with its silent invitation. Riding over the desert sands they began to speculate on what would happen when they arrived. Obviously, being men of considerable prominence, they began to take pride in the fact that they would be the first to discover and recognize the new king signified by the Star's appearance.

Soon, however, the Wise Men began to quarrel among themselves. Who would make the first gift presentation? Who would do the speaking? Whose gift had the most worth? Would it be the most useful, or symbolize the most devotion? Without meaning to, yet because they were human beings, they became alienated from one another. So many petty thoughts filled their minds, they began to fight among themselves. The night of their first quarrel, they looked up—and the Star was gone!

For a time they wandered aimlessly, arguing frequently, despairing alternately. As the Star had disappeared, so had their hope and enthusiasm. Their noble adventure seemed doomed; their aspirations turned to ashes in the chill desert darkness. They became lost, wandering nomads, far from home, their journey uncompleted, treasure unshared, quest unfulfilled, hearts unresponsive, eyes unseeing, and souls void of inspiration.

Then one night, lost and forsaken, they stumbled upon an oasis in the sands. Other travelers had already arrived and were gathered about a shallow well that had gone dry. The first arrivals had already used up what little water was to be found at the bottom of the well, and were now waiting for either help or death. Then, the Wise Men, with no arguing, out of genuine altruism, brought forth their water bags and emptied them into the well that the others might drink. Suddenly, the bleak camp of despair became a place of hospitality, hope, and joy.

But most miraculous of all was that, while emptying their water bags into the well, as they looked down into the water, they saw the reflection of the Star. Once again they found their way! The Star they had lost through self-seeking, they found again through humility. That which had become obscured by petty pride became obvious again in sacrificial sharing. The holy light of God's direction became evident once more as they sought to alleviate the human needs of others. That hard lesson became the guiding principle of their lives, their healed estrangement the miracle of a new relationship.⁺ And so, the legend becomes a parable of great truth: “Love must be in our hearts if the light of Christ is to shine on our path, guide our steps, and show us the secret of successful relationships.”

When the Wise Men finally arrived at the place where Jesus lay, united once more in purpose, two things happened, and in proper sequence: First, they fell down and worshiped Christ the Lord. In adoration and praise they gave Him their devotion. Then, overflowing with the certainty of their faith, they gave Him their gifts.

In this act of worship the Wise Men finally understood that they came not to see, not to talk, not to gain honor ... but to *do reverence*. Only in the spirit of humble love can we truly worship. That is the meaning of our journey from Advent through Christmas to Epiphany. Only love can see the Star which leads to the discovery of God's wonders for our lives.

This morning, as you come forward to receive the Blessed Sacrament, I invite you to come thoughtfully, reverently, submissively. Let each of us rid our hearts of all enmity, criticism, and strife ... of all busyness, preoccupation, and pretense. For, Communion is the moment of truth when we kneel before the awesome mystery of Christ's coming among us. The Wise Men found God and their true selves when they worshiped Him ... by presenting their souls and bodies as a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God.

Wise, wealthy, and powerful, they could do nothing other than submit to something more profound than anything they had ever encountered. The awesome mystery of this newborn King, with its implications for their lives, their future, their hopes and fears, compelled them to kneel open-hearted first, *then* open-handed. God, in His infinite love, had performed a miracle! In the words of the 19th - century poet Christina Rossetti: "Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, love divine. Love came down at Christmas, Stars and angels gave the sign. ... Love shall be our token, love be yours and mine, love to God and neighbor, love for plea and gift and sign."

The heart of the Gospel is that God so *loved* the world that He gave His only Son. Thus, we, aware of the greatness of God's merciful love that sustains us in all our needs; aware of our human inadequacies and shortcomings; solemnly and humbly come before Him at this altar.

From a world of confusion and concern, of war and want, of tension and trauma, we come before the simple elements of bread and wine that dramatize Christ's coming on our behalf. These remind us of His *living* that shows us how to live; His *dying* that assures us there is forgiveness with God; and His *rising* again to show us that no power, human or spiritual, can defeat God's purpose.

In the first-century Early Church, Communion was called the Love Feast. It still is one. Because the bread and wine we receive witness to that great love and sacrifice by which Christ reconciled us to God. In humble love He was born, lived, and died. And so, in humble love we come to His Table, to receive once more that divine love which from the beginning of Creation God has lavished on us.

Only love can see the Star that leads us to where God wants us to go. And when we follow that Star, we are on our way to finding the One who promises us, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no man cometh unto the Father but by me."

Like those Wise Men long ago, today let us bow down and worship Christ the Lord, offering Him our greatest gift, the gift of love. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 6 January 2016, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

† Adapt. Allan J. Weenink, *Only The Wounded Can Serve: Selected Communion Meditations*, (CSS Publishing, 1977).