

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 8, 2023 – THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Reconciled to God—in Christ*”*

Isaiah 60:1-6, 9 (Arise, shine, for our Light has come)
Psalm 72 (Long live the King! Bring Him gifts!)
Ephesians 3:1-12 (In Christ, God made plain a long-hidden mystery)
St. Matthew 2:1-12 (Wise Men from the East visit the Child Jesus)

The Epiphany commemorates the historic moment in which the Gentiles—non-Jews, from a completely different culture—were first received into the family of God’s chosen people, Israel. There, at the manger in Bethlehem, strangers became friends with God. St. Matthew’s well-known account of the Wise Men’s journey from the far east to honor the Jewish Messiah as the Savior of the whole world points us toward the biblical theme of reconciliation ... and reminds me of another story, closer to our own time.

It was Christmas Eve, 1914, the first year of World War I. A strange quiet had settled on the Western Front, a welcome respite for a group of lonesome British soldiers all too familiar with the roar of the cannon and the whine of the rifles. As they reclined in their trenches, each man began to speculate about the activities of loved-ones back home.

“My parents have just finished toasting to my health,” a lad from Liverpool said softly. “I can almost hear the church bells,” a stout man from Ely uttered wistfully. “My whole family will soon be walking out the door to hear the boys’ choir at the Cathedral.”

The men sat quietly for several minutes before a lanky soldier from Kent looked up with tears in his eyes. “This is eerie,” he stammered, “but I can almost that choir singing.” “So can I,” cried another puzzled voice. “I think there’s music coming from the other side.” All the men scrambled to the edge of the trench and cocked their ears.

What they heard were a few sturdy German voices singing Martin Luther's Christmas song, “From heaven above to earth I come, to bear good news to every one! Glad tidings of great joy I bring to all the world, and gladly sing.” (By the way, that’s Hymn #80 in our 1982 Hymnal).

When the hymn ended, the English soldiers sat in frozen silence. Then one of their company, a large man with a powerful voice, broke into the chorus of “God rest ye, merry, gentlemen.” Before he had sung three bars, a dozen voices joined in. By the time he finished, the entire regiment was singing along.

A somewhat wary interlude of silence followed. Then a German tenor began to sing out sweet and clear, “*Stille Nacht*.” Soon, the Christmas hymn was being sung in two languages, as a chorus of nearly a hundred voices echoed back and forth across the trenches, “Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright.”

“Someone’s approaching!” a British sentry shouted, and their attention focused on a single German soldier who was walking slowly toward them, waving a white cloth with one hand and holding out bars of chocolate with the other. Gingerly, men from both sides eased out into the neutral zone and began to greet one another. In the next golden moments, each soldier shared what he had with the others—candy, cigarettes, even a bit of brandy. But most important, they exchanged the battered, yet treasured pictures they carried of their loved ones.

No one knows whose idea it was to start a football game, but with the help of flares, the field was lit up and the British and German soldiers played until both they and the lights were exhausted. Then, as quietly as they had come together, the men returned to their own trenches.

On Christmas day, the men from both sides again joined together, even visiting each other's trenches. The Germans, wishing to avenge the previous night's torch-lit football loss, organized another game of what we Americans call soccer.

A few days later, booming cannon shells exploded across "no-man's land" once more and a barrage of gunfire was again heard in the trenches. For some, however, it was never the same. The enemy was no longer faceless. Now, he was an acquaintance who shared a candy bar or played soccer. When men looked down their rifle barrels at the opposition, now they saw the smiling faces of those whose pictures were shared on that silent, holy night when the birth of the Christ child drew hostile forces together as brothers, and for a few moments, gave weary warriors a taste of peace and good will.

This war story reminds us that the Magi, the three Wise Men who traveled from the East to adore the infant Jesus, were foreigners entering unknown, potentially hostile territory in the land of the Israelites.¹ Even so, they came, because the constellations they studied nightly included one exceptional star that pointed them to the child-king. They came to worship Him and bring Him gifts.

These Gentile visitors seemed to expect everyone to know about His birth, but His own people were unaware their Messiah had been born. Instead of being filled with wonder, both they and King Herod were troubled by this unexpected trio of travelers and their strange announcement (v. 3).

In contrast, the Magi's actions were fearlessly focused on exalting the newborn King of the Jews. Although not Hebrews, they *were* men of faith who believed the sign the Lord had given them. Throughout their long journey, they had depended upon God's divine guidance as they followed the star to Bethlehem (v. 9). And, whether they knew it or not, the gifts they presented to the young Jesus pointed to His identity as Priest, King, and Sacrifice, who would one day lay down His own life to save all humankind.

Unlike Jesus' own people, these men whom tradition holds may *themselves* have been kings were not threatened by the kingdom of God which had come in their midst. Rather, they received God's anointed One with great joy, profound worship, and precious offerings.

As we recall their story, we do well to ask ourselves how will we respond to Christ in our time, right now?² Will we accept His merciful hand reaching out to befriend us in the battle, as did those World War I soldiers one Christmas night? Will we, like the Wise Men, bow before Christ in humility and awe, faith and worship, honoring Him as our Savior, High Priest, and King of Kings?

Paragraph 563 of The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads: "No one, whether shepherd or wise man, can approach God here below except by kneeling before the manger at Bethlehem and adoring him hidden in the weakness of a new-born child."³

When the Lord of Glory came to earth, He was born in a cave that sheltered animals. In the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem there is a cave that may be the same one, or it may not. We cannot know for certain. But there is something beautiful in its symbolism: In order to enter that church where the cave is, the door is so low that all must stoop to go in.⁴

The Magi, those three Wise Men, came with reverence and humility, approaching Christ the King on their knees. And it is supremely fitting that each and every one of us should do likewise. Only in this posture will our hearts be in the right place. And only in this posture can we truly be reconciled to one another—whether as nations or as individuals—and peace become a reality.

Let us pray: Loving God, who sent Your only Son to become one of us, grant us grace to seek Him against all odds, as did the Wise Men, to bow before Him in humility, and to offer Him our finest gifts. And, just as those strangers were reconciled to You on that night long ago, may we bring reconciliation and peace to all whose lives ours touch. This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord, who, with You and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns forever. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, "Humility and Awe," 6 January 2012, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Gerald Fuller, "Come the Wise Men," Sermons for Epiphany 2006 <<http://www.homiliesbyemail.com/Special/Epiphany/sermon10.html>> 4 January 2012.

³ Adapt. Charles F. Stanley, "Bless the King: What the Wise Men Teach us about Worshipping Our Savior," *In Touch*, December 2011, pp. 9-10. Used with permission.

⁴ The Catechism of the Catholic Church, [CatholicPlanet.com](http://www.catholicplanet.com/catechism.htm) <<http://www.catholicplanet.com/catechism.htm>> 3 January 2023.

⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1956) pp. 24-25.