

ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 7, 2024 – THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST – YR. B

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Seeking the Light of the World*”

Isaiah 60:1-6 (A prophecy of the Messiah’s coming)
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 (Praise for the King who rules with justice and righteousness)
Ephesians 3:1-12 (Through Christ we have bold access to God)
St. Matthew 2:1-12 (The wise men come to pay tribute to Jesus)

A man was walking through a mall. He came to an escalator and decided to go up a floor. As he approached, he noticed a warning sign: “Dogs must be carried on escalator.” The man grew anxious, desperate even, as he looked around, asking himself, “Where am I going to find a dog?”

The poor confused man failed to understand that it didn’t matter whether he rode the up escalator without a dog, but it did matter that he carried any dog that might be with him.¹

Just so, it did not matter whether the star guiding the wise men toward Bethlehem would ever lead them to Jesus. What mattered is that they were seeking Christ so devotedly.

Today, we celebrate The Epiphany, a word that comes from the ancient Greek “*Epifanía*,” having to do with “visions of the gods” as well as “light being shined”—as in, a truth revealed. As such, it means “the true revelation of Christ as God.”

In the early Church, Christmas was not celebrated as particularly festive or as the summit of the year. Rather, Epiphany was the primary feast. That strikes us as somewhat strange since we think of Christmas as the central feast, which it has now become.²

Yet if we reflect on this, we can understand that the Church Fathers were mostly men who saw not so much the birth as being important, but the manifestation that this holy child, the Son of God, was for *all* peoples, East or West, Gentile or Jew. And this would be a good thing for us to keep in mind during the conflicted times in which we live.

Jesus, the Messiah, the Holy One of God, is given to *all* people, whether or not they believe in Him, whether or not they serve Him and pay Him homage, whether they take Him into their hearts or ignore Him, or perhaps have yet to even hear of the wonders of His salvation. Jesus came for all of us, regardless of how He was, or is, received.

The universality of Christ’s mission and purpose also teaches us a lesson about ourselves, especially when we think of the wars around the globe and the bitter divisions in our nation; when we know how hard it is to love even members of our own family—never mind persons of other lifestyles, races, classes, religions, ethnicities, or nationalities.

Those who came seeking Jesus so long ago were not strangers to God. To God, they were not foreigners from the East or “Gentiles.” The God to whom they came to pay homage knew them before they were born, and loved them already and forever with an incomparable, unconditional love.

From the wise men’s brave example, we are called in our time to take up the challenge of breaking down barriers that separate race and religion, politics and culture, drawing ourselves and others into the great Epiphany of Jesus for *all* people.

But the story in today’s Gospel begins we know not where. We are only told that suddenly, into Israel, into the land of Palestine, a strange group of men came looking for the recently born King of Israel, the King of the Jews. Where did they come from? We know *they* weren’t kings—they were Magi, learned men who served in the Eastern courts at their highest levels.

Not only were they scholars who could read, write, and interpret all kinds of official things for the imperial governor or whatever ruler they happened to be serving, they were his right-hand men. And because of that, they were highly respected and were treated as kings whenever they traveled to places like Palestine, where they would have an audience with King Herod.

The Magi were a combination of astronomers and astrologers. And today, the science of astronomy thanks these early astrologers, for they were the first to unlock the secrets of the stars. As such, they were well aware that a special star had appeared some place over the Jewish people in the country in which they were then living. “Due to a particular alignment of planets and stars [at that time,] they may have read a hidden meaning among the stars that led them to King Herod. For example, Jupiter’s display could have been of great significance, as astrology associated the planet Jupiter with royalty, so the moon passing it in the constellation of Aries on April 17, 6 B.C. could have heralded the birth of Christ.”³

Apart from their star-gazing interests, for what were these men searching? They were looking for a new way of understanding themselves and where they came from, not just geographically, but spiritually. Like every one of *us*, they needed a life-changing encounter with Jesus Christ.

What was the hunger in their hearts? What were the ideas that troubled them their minds? Why were they seeking a mediator, a peacemaker, for the often-conflicted diversity in their world? All these questions, and many others, were bound together with the Magi, because the Magi were philosophers, poets, and filled with the wisdom of the time, in practical as well as other wondrous ways.

We don’t actually know how many they were. Most interpreters say three because there are three gifts: gold—that demonstrated kingship and was given to a King; frankincense—which is offered to gods and was given to God in the flesh; and myrrh—the sign of death, especially for kings whose bodies were wrapped in the sacred oil of myrrh, and was given to Jesus as a preview of His sacrificial death.

And so they came, the three of them, the ten of them, the army of them, we don’t know how many. And notice, they came not to the stable, but to a house where there was a little child with a young mother taking care of him. There, they dropped to their knees in worship, and offered their gifts to the One whom they believed was both King and God.

Such faith is a wonderful thing! It’s inscrutable when it is truly at work. People will do things out of faith that will go against everything they have heard or experienced before. They are willing to step out of their comfort zones and take risks for the sake of a Kingdom of which they feel a part.

The Magi were well read in the Jewish scriptures because they probably came from Persia, because, you remember, Persia was the site of the Babylonian captivity. They knew well that this strange Hebrew people believed only in one true God, and that they believed one day this one true God would send a Messiah who would change the world for good.

So, when they arrived in Jerusalem they went to see King Herod, not to find out if a king had been born in Palestine, but for help in locating the exact location of that king. Herod called for the Sanhedrin—composed of the scribes, the Pharisees, and many of the scholars and Jews who read and studied the Scriptures—and they told him the prophets said the Anointed One of God would be found in the City of David. David, the shepherd boy who took on the giant Goliath and slew him. The David whom God promised that someday out of his people Israel’s Messiah would be born. So, Herod gave the word to the visitors from the East and told them they would find him, perhaps, in Bethlehem, because that is where the prophets said the Messiah was to be born. They went there—and found Jesus!

Time is not chronicled in this story. Clearly, time had elapsed, as the Holy Family had moved out of a stable and into a house. We’re not sure how long the Eastern visitors stayed, because there seems to have been a two-year period between their visit and the slaughter of the innocents ordered by Herod, who felt severely threatened by another other ruler—even a *potential* king.

We do know that Herod sent the wise men to Jesus, and later ordered that every male child of two and under was to be killed so that the Messiah might be destroyed and the *status quo* might continue.

The story ends with the Magi going back to their countries and they are never heard of again. They never come back to Israel. They don't follow the life of Jesus up-close. They could have done all these things, but that's not the point. They need not return because they *found* the Messiah, the Prince of Peace.

Like the guy who wanted to use the escalator. He didn't need a dog. He just had to take the first step and that would lead him upward. We too, inspired by the risky journey of the Magi—and the reward when they found the One for Whom they were searching—can, in this new year, step farther out in faith. Jesus was surely with the Magi on their travels back home, just as surely as He is with us through every twist and turn, hill and valley, mountain and river, detour and stop sign, of our journey through the days ahead.

A heavenly light led seekers to Jesus at Bethlehem, where they encountered the One who is the Light of the World. Let that light illumine your path as you go forward into the unknowns of 2024. For just as that ancient star still clearly shines in the night sky, Jesus Christ, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and Prince of Peace, unwaveringly shines on our lives and in our hearts.

To Him be worship, praise, glory, power, and dominion, now and forever. *Amen!*

¹ Adapt. Rob Gieselmann, "A Man Was Walking Through a Mall," 6 January 2011, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/a-man-was-walking-through-the-mall-feast-of-the-epiphany-2011) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/a-man-was-walking-through-the-mall-feast-of-the-epiphany-2011>> Feast of the Epiphany – 2011> 27 December 2023. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Denis J. Hanly "Epiphany," n.d., [FatherHanly.com](https://fatherhanly.com) <<https://fatherhanly.com/journey-with-father/year-b-feast-of-the-epiphany/>> 2 January 2024.

³ Jonathan O'Callaghan, "What was the Star of Bethlehem?" 23 December 2022, [Space.com](https://www.space.com) <<https://www.space.com/star-of-bethlehem/>> 2 January 2024.