

Epiphany 2019
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I have to admit, I'm a little jealous of the wise men. They were able to observe, track, and follow a star and I barely passed Physics 101. To be able to understand the movements and dynamics of heavenly bodies and physical objects is a skill they had but, apart from locating Orion's Belt or catching a frisbee, astronomy and physics remain a mystery to me. One thing I do remember from Physics, however, is the concept of the fulcrum. A fulcrum is "the point on which a lever rests or is supported and on which it pivots." For example, it's the thing in the middle of the see-saw that allows two kids--I'm mean kids--to go up and down. Metaphorically, a fulcrum is a "thing that plays a central or essential role in an activity, event, or situation." For example, the Feast of the Epiphany.

The Feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrate today, is the fulcrum between the Christmas story and rest of Jesus' mission and ministry. It is the thing that plays a pivotal role in the unfolding narrative of God's rescue plan for the world. Epiphany concludes the twelve days of Christmas (which means you can now go home and take down your Christmas decorations) and it begins the next stage of the journey during which more and more people will see the manifestation of God Incarnate in Jesus Christ. That's what Epiphany means, by the way, manifestation. Epiphanies are experiences that one way or another make known something that hitherto was unknown or unseen.

What was unknown until Jesus' birth was who the long-awaited Messiah would be. Who is this person who will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace"? Who is the one who will "deliver the poor who cries out in distress, and the oppressed who has no helper"? At Christmas, we learn that it's Jesus. On Epiphany, we learn that Jesus' mission as this long-awaited Messiah is destined to expand beyond the people of Israel, to all the nations, and it begins with these wise men from the East.

Over the course of the Sundays after Epiphany, our gospel readings will show us how this mission spreads and grows--from the magi today, to Jesus' Baptism next Sunday, then on to Jesus' first miracle turning water into wine at a wedding, then Jesus reading from Isaiah and announcing God's anointing on him to bring good news to the poor, then to Jesus calling his disciples to join in this mission, and Jesus teaching the crowds how to live in the Sermon on the Plain, and finally to the Transfiguration the Sunday before Lent, which is the book-end to today's Epiphany where Jesus' glory is revealed, not in a crib to wise men but on a mountain to foolish disciples. Each of those gospels, this whole season, is about God's appearing, God's Epiphany, in Jesus and what that means for the world.

And that brings us back today, the fulcrum of this season and the important and mysterious characters in this story--the magi. Who were they? Why were they there? And why the heck would they bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh to a newborn? I mean, I can understand the gold but surely diapers and casseroles would have been much more helpful than frankincense and myrrh.

While these wise men aren't given names or specific origins, we do know that they came "from the East," meaning they were not Jewish but Gentiles. We know that they were "wise men" meaning more than one, but we don't actually know how many there were--we tend to assume three because of the gifts that were presented but it could have been two with three gifts or ten with three gifts. We can also tell they weren't the most politically savvy, as they go to one king to ask where a rival king was supposed to have been born in order that they may pay him homage, perhaps not the smartest move. And finally, we know that they were defiant, as they ignored King Herod by going home another way and foiling his plans to destroy the True Kin of the Jews.

That's the Who? What? And Where? But the Why? is what's most important here. Why do they visit Jesus and Why is that important for Matthew's gospel? They visit to pay homage to the child who has been born king of the Jews. This is important because it reveals that the people who were supposed to worship the Messiah (the chief priests and scribes of the people) didn't and the people who were supposedly outside the bounds of the Messiah, Gentiles and foreigners, are the first to recognize and pay him homage. And *this* is the good news of God in Jesus Christ, that the King and Savior of Israel is *also* the King and Saviour of the whole world.

This is the good news that St. Paul preached, as expressed in the letter to the Ephesians... "In former generations," it says, "this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, *the Gentiles have become fellow heirs,*

members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

Thanks to St. Paul the message that there was a Savior for the *whole world* was brought to non-Jews. Thanks to St. Paul, the message of their inclusion in God’s covenant and salvation was spread far and wide and eventually made it from Bethlehem of Judea to Concord of New Hampshire. And thanks to *St. Paul’s*, that message is still being proclaimed here in our corner of the world.

What the message again? *That in Christ, we have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of God’s salvation.* It’s the message that God loves us, whoever we are, just as we are. It’s the message that the new life of Jesus Christ is *our* new life as we are reborn in baptism and sanctified by the Holy Spirit as we grow in our faith. It’s the message that no matter how bad we think we might be, or how far away from God we might feel, God is right there with us, and nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

That is quite an Epiphany. Not only was the long-awaited Messiah born in such humble beginnings, but his mission and love were first recognized by those who had for so long been deemed outsiders, foreigners, untouchables. Perhaps that’s really why we call these magi “wise men.” Not simply because they were wise on their own. But because in their visit to Jesus, this child who is born King of the Jews, they learned God’s wisdom that God’s love is for all time and for all people. And what did they do with this wisdom? They

went home, by a different route, forever changed by “the news of the boundless riches of Christ.”

May you also be forever changed on this Feast of the Epiphany, as you continue on your journey with Christ.

Amen.