

“Epiphany – The Season of Light”
Matthew 2: 1-12
January 08, 2012

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The Epiphany of the Lord was this past Friday, January 6th.

Webster has three definitions for the word Epiphany:

1. When it is *capitalized*: it means the church festival celebrated on January 6 commemorating the coming of the Magi as the first appearance of Christ to the Gentiles.
2. An appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being
3. A sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something: an intuitive grasp of reality; an illuminating discovery: a revealing scene or moment. An “Aha” moment!

In our Christian tradition [Christmas](#), as well as [Easter](#), is celebrated as a period of time, a season of the church year, rather than just a day. The Season of Christmas begins with the First Sunday of [Advent](#), it concludes with [Epiphany](#), which looks ahead to the mission of the church to the world in the **light** of the Nativity.

Epiphany means "to show" or "to make known" or even "to reveal." In Matthew we just read the familiar story of the coming of the wise men bringing gifts as they visit and worship the Christ child, and by so doing "reveal" Jesus to the world as Lord and King.

As with most aspects of the Christian liturgical calendar, Epiphany has theological significance as a teaching tool in the church. The Wise Men or Magi who brought gifts to the infant Jesus were the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as "King" and so were the first to "show" or "reveal" Jesus to a wider world as the incarnate Christ.

This act of worship by the Magi, which corresponded to Simeon’s blessing – that the child Jesus would be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles,"¹ was one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, of all nations, of

¹ Luke 2: 32

all races, and that the word of God in the world would not be limited to only a few.

The season of Epiphany is the time in which the identity of Jesus, his real identity, is made clear and clearer to all who will look, listen, and see. What began with the very private annunciation by the angel Gabriel to Mary and then another angel appeared to Joseph, and more angels appeared to the shepherds and told them to go and find the babe in Bethlehem. It became clear to an ever-expanding audience of witnesses that something miraculous had taken place.

The circle gets bigger and bigger and bigger, more and more people are included and from this Sunday to Easter and everything that we read and hear in Holy Scripture is an **epiphany** of Jesus. These epiphanies just get larger and larger until we are included in everyone of them. This is a very important season in the church year because this is the season in which we come to see who Jesus is, where he is to be found, and where we begin to understand what he is about.

The Epiphany is that revelation of God in the world where the message is greater than the manger and goes well beyond it.

To leave the story of Jesus Christ in the manger, to pack it up as we have done with our nativity scenes and put them away for another year, is to fail to understand what the Epiphany is all about.

Everything we say, everything we do in church in these coming weeks is part of this growing process of discovery of who Jesus is and where he is to be found. That's why this season is known as the **season of light**.

This most vivid, most familiar, and most engaging story introduces to us the great characters of the Epiphany: the magi – the wise men – the three kings. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the church of the Greeks, the Russians, and the Armenians, the arrival of the magi on January 6 is a great holy day and is celebrated with tremendous festivity, pomp, and circumstance.

They arrive as representatives of the exotic, the secular, and the scientific world beyond the provincial little town of Bethlehem and their arrival is a sign for all of us.

They are our Epiphany witnesses; we understand them and their hectic, exotic journey and we love to see them at the manger for if we understand rightly who they are, they are very much like ourselves. They opened their treasures and presented to him gifts, though **it was the gift given to them** that brought them to their knees. They saw God revealed for us.

Those of you who portrayed the three Kings at our “live nativity” scene over two weeks ago now, as you stood next to the camel, and just outside the manger, close to Mary and Joseph and the babe, you were there, it was a gift given to you to be there.

This all began with the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary telling her that she would conceive a child by God and the child would be born to be savior of the world.

Put aside what that must have felt like for Mary, and remember that all Bible stories have a deeper metaphysical and metaphorical truth. Angels are the thoughts of God and Mary isn't the only one who had angels come and talk to her. Angels are talking to all of us, but most of us don't recognize them, don't hear them, let alone listen to them.

Gabriel represents a particular kind of message from God. Namely God wants to transform us spiritually, miraculously turn us into a new people, and extend **His love** on the earth through us.

The difference between us and Mary is that she had the humility and grace to say, “Yes.”

You and I say, “Thanks, maybe sometime, but not right now,”

Around all of us there are angels calling us to a new beginning, the birth of a new being. Every situation represents a choice:

Do we prefer to stay with our old patterns of thought and behavior, or do we choose to play life in a higher, **more loving way?**

Will we continue to tread the path of limitation and fear, though that path has grown painful, boring and old, or will we choose to give birth to a higher mode of expression?

The Christ within is a newborn self, fathered by God and mothered by our humanity, here to express the divine potential that exists inside all of us.

Mary could **NOT** have said “no” to God because it would have been contrary to her nature.

At our deepest core, it’s contrary to our nature as well. We long to say “yes” to Him, but we are so out of touch with who we really are, so not in conscious contact with our own souls, that we continually say “no.” And there, in that ***rejection of love*** lays the tragedy of human existence.

One day we say, “Yes, God, you can express your love through me.” And on another day in another situation, we just can’t make the stretch – we say “no” to more forgiveness or more depth or more love.

Yet Gabriel persists, and every time we say “no,” he simply waits around to ask us again.

“I’m bringing this situation around again to give you another chance.”

Slowly but surely our hearts begin to open; we resist that love less often the longer we journey on the spiritual path; and ultimately we will resist no longer.

If we are deeply honest with ourselves, we know we are longing to be transformed by God.

When Gabriel spoke to Mary, she was a 14 year old girl, and now he speaks to each of us with no regard to age or gender, for as long as we are willing to be part of God’s plan, God has a plan for us.

And that is when life begins to truly change: not when we have new things, but when we have a new spirit.

The birth of **God’s love** into the world is not something that happened long ago, but something that is happening in present time – right now.

It is important **NOT** just because of what it did to the world, but because of what it does to us right now.

As we **love each other**, God lives in us. He overshadows our minds and hearts. He guides our thinking, our behavior and our words. He removes from us our fearful thoughts and replaces them with loving thoughts. In that lies our holiness, and there is literally nothing our holiness cannot do.

When the three kings bowed down and worshipped the baby Jesus, they were expressing the relative weakness of the powers of the world compared to the power of our true meaning when we are centered in **the love of God**.

They had an epiphany – they were in the presence of a divine being – the Christ child. The radiance of the divine child has the power to transform.

As we pray for an ever more open heart, the action of God’s Spirit redeems our past and frees our future to be unlike it. Our fears are melted away.

We are spiritually reborn, the illusions of the past fall away and we have the chance to be born again. The radiance of the divine is you and I transformed.

At times someone will say to us, “You seem like a completely new person.”

At times we do seem like a new person. And sometimes, we actually are.

As we begin the New Year together at the Presbyterian Church of Palatine, let me conclude by sharing with you a quote from the Rev. Dr. Peter Gomes, the former Dean of the Chapel at Harvard Divinity School and a professor at Harvard who died this past February at the age of 68:

“The world will not change until and unless we change; the spirit of Christmas cannot be borne out in the cold January air unless we are borne out by it and indeed born again by it.”²

As we ordained and install new church officers this day; and as we gather around the table today to share the sacrament of Holy Communion on this Epiphany Sunday let us remember, that the true miracle, the true gift, the true epiphany is that God continues to give himself in Christ to all people in all places and at all times.

² Peter Gomes, “Strength for the Journey”

That same gift is given to us this Sunday – right now – and by the light of the glory of His countenance, God shows us that we are the subjects of His work; that we are His work; and finally in us, God’s glory will be made visible.

For ultimately, we are truly *not simply* meant to be witnesses to the epiphany of our Lord, but **we are to BE His epiphany!**

Amen!

