

Sermon for The Epiphany  
January 6, 2008  
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Isaiah 60:1-6  
Psalm 72:1-7,10-14  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

“We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar, field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star. O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.”

It’s the perfect hymn for the Epiphany. That’s what we mark, the three kings, the three wise men, the three magi, riding their camels over the desert, following the Christmas star to find baby Jesus.

Most of us grew up with the story as if it were a continuation of the Nativity. The shepherds got there first because the angels gave them directions. The wise men showed up later because they had to stop and ask directions from King Herod.

Our tradition has mashed the two stories together, but they are separate and distinct. Luke is the story of the shepherds. That’s the story we heard at Christmas about the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. The story of the three wise men comes from Matthew, the Gospel we heard today. They are separate, they are different, and they don’t go together because the stories tell of two different views of Jesus the Christ.

For Luke, the story of the shepherds epitomized the ministry of Jesus to the poor of the world. For Matthew, the importance was that Jesus was born into the line of King David and was of royal lineage. Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophets that God would send a king to rule over the kingdom. Luke has Jesus being born in a stable, Matthew has Jesus born in the home of Joseph.

We don’t know exactly who wrote the Gospel of Matthew. No name is attached to the Gospel from within it, and it wasn’t until the second century that it was labeled as the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew means “the gift of God,” which might indicate that the name is actually the word, and the gospel is the gift. However, tradition says that Matthew was the tax collector.

We also don’t know exactly when the Gospel was written. Scholars believe that Matthew was written some time in the 80s of the first century after the destruction of the temple. This was a time before Christianity existed, when it was still called “the way” and still part of Judaism.

Scholars speculate that the Gospel probably was written in Antioch, where many early “Christians” and Jews had fled after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D. by Rome after the Jewish Revolt, that began in 66 A.D.

Scholars also speculate about the reason Matthew was written: that it was an explanation of why Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish prophets and the logical direction that Judaism should take now that the Temple had been destroyed.

Matthew introduces the three wise men after providing a genealogy that ties Jesus to David and Abraham. At that time in history, it was believed that anything of significance on Earth was reflected in the Heavens. That would mean that if a king was born, the stars would mark that birth. So we have a star that actually does things that stars don’t do to lead the wise men to Jesus.

So we grow up with the idea that the Epiphany is about the gifts the Magi gave to Jesus. After all, Epiphany is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. In some communities, the gifts aren’t given until then. In the Eastern Church the focus is on Epiphany rather than Christmas. Why would that be?

Epiphany comes from a Greek word that means “manifestation”. In the case of THE Epiphany the meaning is not what is given to Jesus, but what God gave to humanity with the gift of Jesus: the revelation of Jesus the Christ as the Son of God.

The Old Testament reading from Isaiah foretells the manifestation: “Arise, shine for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness will cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Isaiah opens the door for us in understanding that it is through the Jews that salvation comes: “you shall be light to enlighten the gentiles, and the glory of the Lord shall shine upon you.”

Paul knows Isaiah and that is what he means by the mystery being unknown to humankind, and now revealed in Jesus so that the Gentiles (that’s us) have become fellow heirs.

The three wise men represent all of those of us who are not Jews, bringing the gifts of our lives to the child. As it says: “When the star stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid homage.”

That is what we do today to say thank you to God for the gift of the Son that we are no longer strangers in the land, but have become children of the Lord God Almighty, and heirs of the eternal kingdom.

Amen.