

1st Sunday after Epiphany

Psalms: 72, 97

First Lesson: Isaiah 60:1-9

60 Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee.

² For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee.

³ And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.

⁴ Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side.

⁵ Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.

⁶ The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew forth the praises of the LORD.

⁷ All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister unto thee: they shall produce acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory.

⁸ Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows?

⁹ Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.

Second Lesson Matthew 2:1-12

2 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east and are come to worship him.

³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

⁶ And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people, Israel.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

Introduction

As I began to prepare my sermon for this week, I realized that I was not as familiar with the concept of Epiphany as I should be. I knew it represented the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles but in other areas I was not as familiar. I figured I was not alone in this, so I decided an effective way to start was to go into it a little deeper. Here is what I learned.

Epiphany is a Christian feast day celebrated on January 6 every year. It is also sometimes known as “Three Kings’ Day.” The Christian year begins with the season of Advent, which leads up to Christmas on December 25. Then come the Twelve Days of Christmas, which lead to the feast of Epiphany on January 6.

“Epiphany” comes from the Greek word *epiphaneia*, meaning “manifestation” or “appearance.” The word is used to refer to the manifestation of Jesus Christ.

From 2 Timothy 1:9-10

⁹Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began,

¹⁰ But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel:

In the context of the Church year, Epiphany refers to the appearance of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world to both Israel and the Gentiles. For this reason, Epiphany is commonly associated with the visitation of the Magi (or “wise men”), who were almost certainly Gentiles. From our second reading today, in Matthew 2:1-12, we read the story of this account. In addition to the coming of the Magi, Jesus’s baptism and his changing water into wine at the wedding in Cana are also commonly associated with Epiphany. These are two other “manifestations” of Christ’s glory. During Epiphany, we focus on the mission of the Church to reach all the peoples of the earth and the great gift of God’s grace in revealing healing truth and light to the world.

Another tradition sometimes employed that I found interesting was the creation of a special cake that often goes along with the Epiphany celebration. These are often called “King Cakes.” They usually contain certain items (such as a miniature figurine of the baby Jesus) that give the finder certain privileges or obligations. In one church I found they bake the cake and hide a plastic figurine of baby Jesus. Whoever finds a baby Jesus in their piece of cake has to bake cookies for the annual church meeting, which is held in early February around the feast of the Presentation. Interesting idea!

Body

(Matthew 2:1-12) Jesus is born in Bethlehem and upon seeing the star in the East the arrival of the magi (2:1-2); Herod’s alarm and consultation of the priests and scribes (2:3-6); Herod’s request of the magi (2:7-8); the magi’s visit and adoration of the Christ child (2:9-11); and the departure of the magi (2:12).

In our second lesson we get the full account of the visit of the Magi or Wise Men to honor our newborn king. Today, we opened up our service with the processional hymn, *We Three Kings*. In this hymn, written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins, we are introduced to the gifts that were brought to Jesus by these men. Hopkins wrote this hymn for a Christmas pageant when he was the Rector of Christ Episcopal church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. In our reading from Matthew, (v.11) we learn of the gifts that were brought.

“And when they had come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh. (Matt. 2:19).

It is in our opening hymn where we get some insight into the symbolic value of these gifts. There is no reason to believe these men were actually kings but, rather, were probably

astronomers or highly educated members of a priestly caste. It is significant what the gifts they bring represent and how we, in our world today, can offer God the same.

The gold given to Jesus is associated with royalty. Even today we can appreciate a gift of gold. It is a gift that is worth something and no doubt was appreciated by Joseph and Mary. The hymn tells how the wise man acknowledged “Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain, Gold I bring to crown Him again, King forever, Ceasing never, Over us all to reign.” Today we can offer up our worth, our tithing, to help finance the work of the church and to help spread the Gospel. We use the resources of the church to help others such as the Dalit children or in one of the appeals that is championed by our Bishop. Your gift of money to the church or any organization that advances the call of discipleship or service is serving the King.

The second gift presented is Frankincense or incense to Jesus. Once again, our hymn describes the encounter. “Frankincense to offer have I, Incense owns a Deity nigh, prayer and praising, All men raising, Worship Him, God on High.” Incense represents our worship and adoration of God. In many high churches incense is burned to signify prayer and the offering of worship to God. Worship is what we do every Sunday, and it is the central activity of the church. Worship is one thing that defines the proper relationship between us and God, signifying His place in our life and the universe. Worship and thanking God for all we have is especially important and we can honor God through this. Making it a mindful intent to come to church, singing hymns of praise, praying daily and thanking God for all He has done in your life are effective ways to give God your worship.

Our third gift is myrrh. Raise your hand if you know what this substance is. To be honest, I was not really sure either. It is a species of balsam that is found in India and Arabia. The plant sap can be made into a liquid that has analgesic properties. You may remember that Jesus was

given wine mixed with myrrh when he hung on the cross. It was also used in the ancient world for embalming. It may seem like a strange gift, but it prophesied the suffering and death that would come later for our Messiah. Once again, our hymn describes this gift. "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume, breathes a life of gathering gloom, sorrow, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb." What does this gift tell us about what we can offer Jesus? The myrrh represents suffering, bleeding, and dying and should remind us of Christ's suffering and death upon the cross for our redemption. He wants us to trust in Him and love Him with our whole heart, mind and soul as we remember His sacrificial death that brought us salvation. He wants us to confess our sins and work diligently to live a holy, righteous and Godly life to receive the gift He so graciously gives to us. To God, we can offer ourselves, our lives, our souls and our bodies to Him and trust Him to lead the path forward.

Action/Conclusion

It is in the final stanza of *We Three Kings* where the author sums up the three gifts and offers a prelude to the end of Jesus's earthly life. "Glorious now behold Him arise, King, God and Sacrifice, Heaven sings Hallelujah, Hallelujah the earth replies." King, God and Sacrifice. King the royalty of Gold, God who we worship represented by incense, and sacrifice: the death of Jesus on the cross for our redemption.

It is my hope that in this season of Epiphany that we remember the coming of the Wise Men and what their gifts to Jesus signified. The season of Epiphany will not be complete until we too have come into His presence and offered Him our gifts. Our gifts to the church and others, our worship of Him, and our honest confession, our trust, and our total love to God. In return we can be assured of His promises of joy, forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with Him. In this season of Epiphany may we be cognizant of what we can offer God and how we can

worship Him. To the only wise God our savior, be glory, majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen