

## **Enlightenment**

Matthew 2:1-12

The Feast of the Epiphany/ Year C

January 3, 2010

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. AMEN.**

Children love stories, the more imaginative the story, the better. One needs only reflect on the recent popularity of the Harry Potter books to know the truth of such a statement. Parents and caregivers delight in recounting tales to children who listen with rapt attention. However, as children grow older, they gradually become aware that many of their childhood stories are little more than fables or fairy tales. Sadly, they move beyond such stories, placing them onto dusty shelves to await that moment when they will have grown sufficiently wise enough to read them again. This morning's gospel, too, is a wonderful story and it is quite easy to get caught up in the more imaginative details of the narrative. There are stars and kings, journeys and searches, a newborn baby and inappropriate gifts. One suspects that clean diapers would have been infinitely more useful to Mary than a pile of frankincense. The more enticing elements of Saint Matthew's story clearly border on the fantastic. The challenge for us, this morning, is not to discount Matthew's story, anymore than it is to pick his story apart like some modern scientist engaged in a dissection. Rather, we must embrace the story. We must live into it and gently search among its delicate and wondrous strands for the depth of meaning which shines there like a brilliant and yet barely perceived star.

As some scholars have noted, the seasons of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany form a cycle of light within the church's liturgical year. Advent focuses on the light which is far off, on the light which will come again at the consummation of history, while Christmas centers on the light which shatters and then explodes into night's darkest hour. Epiphany, for its part, invites us to explore the light which is now uncontrollably loose in the world, the light made manifest, made present to us, in Jesus of Nazareth. The old Greek word for Epiphany, *epiphaneia* hints at just such an understanding. *Epiphaneia* means "the appearing." Today, and for the next six weeks, we celebrate the appearing, the revelation, the "making known" of our Savior Jesus Christ. During the Christmas season, we were able to witness the light, which is no less than Christ himself, gently seep into the world, almost unnoticed. We marveled as the luminous tendrils of God's goodness quietly unfurled in the face of a child cradled by a bedraggled mother. This same light will now enable us to see more clearly not only what our God is accomplishing but also the shadows which have always haunted this time of year despite our best attempts to ignore them- the shadows of hatred, of evil, of ignorance, of opposition and outright resistance. These shadows, too, gather around this child. They will try to rise up and snuff out the light's very existence. They will fight furiously to destroy its promise and its hope. In a very real sense, the season of Epiphany opens with a demand that we draw a line in the sand and then choose on which side of that line we will position ourselves. Will we resist the possibility, even the probability of evil or will we practice it? Will we stand in Christ, allowing his Light to expose and reveal us for who we are or will we ally ourselves with the creeping darkness so prevalent in our

world?

Already, we see hints of what such stark choices may cost us. Though our Christmas trees have yet to come down, the specter of another tree, hewn of timbers, begins to rise. Matthew tells us, rather matter-of-factly, that the magi, who take such prominence in this morning gospel, are searching for the “King of the Jews.” They are looking for the one, whose very title will echo hauntingly across the darkened judgment hall of Pontius Pilate on an early and not too distant Friday morning. In just a brief passage of time, “The King of the Jews,” for whom these wise ones search, will be mocked by a crown of thorns beaten into his brow and a placard hung above his head. Even as an infant, it would seem, Jesus’ kingship appears shaky, but King Herod’s is even shakier.

Herod is a foreigner from the land of Edom, who, having conquered his neighboring kin (thanks in no small part to Roman assistance), convinces the Emperor to install him on the throne of Judea. Herod tries to shore up his own insecurities with massive building projects, including the renovation of the Temple, but to no avail. The Jews still despise him. They want a king with Jewish blood, not some Roman lackey. When the magi arrive, star struck, at his palace door, Herod’s anxiety is almost comic. Without a trace of guile or pretense, these wise men from the east ask him: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews. We have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” While we could easily fault the magi’s for having their heads in the stars and even perhaps for wearing their hearts on their sleeves, what we cannot fault them for is their logic. They have not come to Jerusalem, the royal capital of Judea, on some misguided whim. After all, where else would one go to find a King of the Jews, if not to the royal palace of the nation in question? Unfortunately, what the magi believe to be an announcement of “good news” is clearly a cause for dismay, disturbance and turmoil for Herod and for others who are in power.

The King, paranoid on the best of days and a psychotic mess at most other points in time, is simply beside himself. He leaves the magi standing in the palace lobby as he races about assembling his own panel of experts. Surely, the chief priests and scribes will be able to shed some light on this inconvenient matter. “Where is the Messiah to be born?” Herod asks them. The religious authorities feverishly consult their scrolls and come to a singular conclusion. “Bethlehem,” they tell Herod, “a star rising out of Jacob. From Bethlehem will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” Oddly, at no point in time, do the priests and scribes seem to be the least bit concerned over what Herod’s inquiry could mean for them or for their people. Surely, they are able to see the star, but then again, maybe they aren’t. After all, those who stand on the inside of power and privilege will often remain blind, while those deemed outsiders- the marginalized, the poor, the alien from a foreign land whether wise or foolish, whether bearing a proverbial crown or not- are frequently the ones able to truly see. Whatever the case, the religious authorities depart the scene as rapidly as they entered into it. They display not a twitch or a qualm at the potential devastation they have set in motion. Their sin is not so much opposition to the Christ child. Their sin is not even collusion with the calculated evil of Herod. Their sin is indifference. They simply do not care. They are uninterested and

apathetic. It is a sin, which, we, modern Christians, to our great shame, often share.

Herod, on the other hand, has not an apathetic bone in his body. He is far too self-interested. His response is cold and devious. He has already murdered a large portion of his own family to secure his position in power. What is one more child? He returns to the magi and with great cunning sends them on their way to a two-bit town in the backwater of Judea. “Go, find the child, leave no stone unturned” he tells them, “and when you have found him, send word and I will join you at once in your worship.” Whether or not Herod really expected the magi to report back is debatable, he may have thought he knew enough already. The threat, which this child poses, is simply too great for him to sit back and do nothing. His murderous intent, skulking along the very edges of the starlight, will follow the magi to Bethlehem. Countless children will die. Rachel will weep and refuse to be comforted, all because Herod’s rabid fear doesn’t know whom to bite.

Re-saddling their camels, the wise ones leave Herod palace behind, allowing its occupants to return to their intrigues and malevolent schemes. The star, which brought the magi to Jerusalem, finds them again and leads them onward through the night. Like a celestial GPS, it takes them directly to their destination. One wonders if the star would have gotten them all the way there, even if they hadn’t stopped to inquire at the royal palace. Despite the disturbing and even tragic reactions of Herod and the religious authorities, the delightful comedy contained within this morning’s gospel continues unabated. We watch as a majestic caravan, pulls up ponderously and with great dignity, in front of a tumbledown house. Inside are a young peasant couple from Nazareth. The woman appears rather plain and her husband is salt-of-the-earth. They have a toddler, they clearly adore. There is nothing overly exciting about them. Nevertheless, the magi, to the great shock of the neighbors, ring the couple’s doorbell. Before long, camels are being unloaded, gifts presented, bows and prostrations made, to a young child, who, few besides Mary and Joseph have been able to see as royalty, as the Word of God enfleshed. We become aware, if we haven’t been aware already, that it is the strangers, the outsiders, the wise ones from the east who have been given the gift of enlightenment in this morning’s gospel. They are enlightened not because of their own merit, but because they have not allowed themselves to become blinded by darkness masquerading as light. Their hearts are able to see the signs, to catch sight of the star. They understand, however imperfectly, the significance of the heavenly portents and announce that another power has come to earth. They come seeking and searching and offering gifts.

As Christians, we, too, must seek and search for Christ. This is the first part of our task. We must look for him in each other and in the poor of the earth. We must ask ourselves, “Where is the light of Christ present in our lives and in our neighborhoods. The second part of our task takes considerable cooperation with God’s grace. We are called to manifest Christ’s presence for others. We are to be a revelation. We are to be the appearance of Christ to the world. We are to be enlightened ones. We are to be those who are filled with light, who are able to act as beacons whereby others are then able to steer toward home. We are to shine for those in distress, those searching and those who plot their course by the hope of resurrection. Our worship of Christ shines forth in our

willingness to seek him and then to offer him the gift of who we are. The alternative is indifference or opposition. In a convicting dream, at the conclusion of this morning's gospel, the magi are told, not to return to Herod. There to go home by another way. This is what Advent, Christmas and Epiphany is ultimately about. Another Way! Another way to live, another way to love, another way to belong, another way to show forth God's glory. Another way to shine for all to see.