

A Sermon for Epiphany, Given on January 7, 2007

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The coming of the Wise Men, what we call the Epiphany, is a sort of Chapter two of the Christmas story. The scene is changed. The young Jesus is now in a “house” rather than a stable. He is no longer a new-born. He is, by the reckoning of the Wise Men, around two years old.

The main point of the story is that the Wise Men are Gentiles—unlike the Jewish shepherds to whom Christ was revealed on Christmas Day. This fulfills several Old Testament prophecies. As Isaiah wrote, “The Gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (60:3).

The strange part of the story is how these Gentiles from far away knew about the birth of the Messiah when those in power in Israel, King Herod and the religious leaders, had no clue. And, when those in power were given the news, they were not happy about it.

Herod the Great had the title, “King of the Jews.” This title was bestowed upon him by Rome as a result of much political maneuvering. When the Wise Men asked about the one “born king of the Jews,” this posed an obvious threat to his rule. One who was born king would surely supplant this pretender, who wasn’t even fully Jewish.

This threat caused Herod to slaughter the Holy Innocents, all the boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem, while the Holy Family fled to Egypt. This harkens back to the killing of all the Jewish male babies by Pharaoh in the time of Moses. Jesus, like Moses, escaped and became the savior of his people.

The story of the Epiphany highlights a central theme of Matthew’s gospel: the rejection of Jesus by the leadership in Israel and the acceptance of Jesus by the Gentiles. As John’s Christmas Day gospel tells us, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God” (1:11-13 KJV).

The New Testament presents the acceptance and rejection of Jesus as a matter of divine choice. Christ is revealed to some and not to others. Why? Why did the Wise Men see the star and come and rejoice? Why did no one in Israel see the star? Why does this continue to be so? Why are some led to Christ while others don’t see? Why do some rejoice while others angrily resist the King of Kings?

There is no simple answer that takes full account of all the evidence. We might say that Herod did not see because he was busy protecting his turf, while the Wise Men were open to the revelation. But, what, then, about St. Paul, whose hostility to Christ was overcome by force?

Sometimes the most unlikely people come to faith while those who seem so good from a human perspective do not see. Sometimes those towards whom great evangelistic efforts are expended remain unbelieving, while others come to faith out of the blue.

The mystery of the revealing of Christ is captured in a verse in Luke’s gospel. Jesus said, “I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are

delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and *he* to whom the Son will reveal *him*.” (10:21 KJV).

The church gathers around the altar as a privileged group. As Jesus said, “Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see.” (Luke 10:23 KJV).

The visit of the Wise Men provides a pattern for the Christian revelation. They came to Christ with great joy, expecting, no doubt, that the world at large would also be happy about this Good News. But they discovered that the world was not happy. They had to flee for their lives. They had to share in the cross.

Each of us is led to Christ. We have our star—that event or series of events, that thing or series of things—through which we come to know Jesus and put our faith in him. We “rejoice with exceeding great joy.” But we soon discover that faith brings conflict.

Christ was born to unseat Herod as King of the Jews— and Herod was not ready to be unseated. Christ comes into our lives to conquer our enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil—and our enemies are not ready to be conquered. Thus, the world opposes our faith; the flesh rebels against the Holy Spirit and the devil tries to lead us to despair, to abandon faith. The revelation of Christ leads us to the cross.

The presence of the Son of God in the world, in us, is the guarantee of victory. As Christ is revealed, the devil fights back “with great wrath because he knows that his time is short” (Rev. 12). However, none of the plots against Christ succeed. Herod cannot kill the infant Christ, for it is not yet the time for his death. By the providence of God, Christ is led to die at just the right moment to triumph over Satan, sin and death.

We are opposed and tempted. At times we fall. But, in Christ, we are not overcome. The revelation of Christ brings us our share of the cross, but it also puts within us the promise of Easter. As Romans says, “If God *be* for us, who *can be* against us?” (8:30-31).