

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 5, 2014
Feast of the Epiphany
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Isaiah 60:1-9
Psalm 72:1-10
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

The Greek word *epiphany* means “manifestation” or “openly showing forth.” The word was sometimes used to describe the official visit of a king or emperor to a city or region of his kingdom. Occasions like this were rare, and so when they happened the king would usually appear publicly in all of his dazzling splendor.

The pre-Christian Syrian ruler Antiochus, impressed with his own power, at one point assumed the name Antiochus Epiphanes as a declaration that he was the appearance of a god on earth.

Matthew, however, has a different take on things. The religious and secular culture of Matthew’s day contained many stories to the effect that a great ruler would be born, and his birth would be accompanied by celestial signs. Our OT lesson from Isaiah 60 is part of that lore, announcing that the nations would come to Jerusalem to worship Israel’s God.

Epiphany, then, is the time when we focus on the appearance or manifestation of Christ to Israel and the nations.

If Christmas has seen the light of God rekindled in the world, then Epiphany shows that light coming into full view, being seen by others, and casting its brightness upon all people. Indeed, at the heart of Epiphany is the conviction that in Jesus, God shows himself not just to the Jewish community, but to all the peoples of the world. Our epistle lesson from Ephesians bears powerful testimony to this great mystery, revealing God's inclusive heart from the very beginning.

In terms of our marking time through the Christian year, we are moving now at a rapid pace. Matthew gives us clues that as the wise men arrive from the East, Jesus is not an infant. This makes sense, as the kings would have traveled more than a thousand miles (according to most scholars) to reach Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Additionally, when the wise men arrive, Matthew tells us that Jesus and Mary are "in the house," and not the manger. And still further, paranoid King Herod issues the command to kill all children 2 years old and under in his attempt to destroy the new king.

All of this is to say then that Luke's shepherds and Matthew's shepherds do not arrive at the same time, and we should not confuse Matthew's account with Luke's.

In terms of our marking time through the Church Year, what is happening now is that we are being moved forward rapidly to the beginning of Jesus' adult

life. This coming Sunday (the First Sunday after Epiphany) celebrates the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry. Subsequent weeks will introduce us to the calling of his disciples, his first miracle at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, his first confrontation with religious authorities, and his early teaching and preaching.

The next seven weeks (the season after the Epiphany) are about appearance, visibility, recognition and public action. Having come into the world at Christmas in the form of a newborn baby, God now sets out to challenge and heal the world through the ministry of the adult Christ. After the glimmerings of Advent and Christmas, the light *of* the world now shines clearly *in* the world, and will become even brighter as Jesus' earthly ministry takes its course through the remainder of the Church Year.

Today, as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table, we are reminded that the coming of the Light into the world engenders different responses from different people. The wise men react very differently than does King Herod.

Their response, however, is not the issue. What matters is whether we are prepared to allow the Light of Christ to penetrate the dark areas of *our* lives, to welcome the light and the healing it can bring.

If so, come to the Table with joy. For the Light has come to pierce the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.