

## Sermon Epiphany

Today's bulletin says "Epiphany observed" but January 6<sup>th</sup> is the date we are told we should celebrate this feast. However, the Church allows us to use an adjacent Sunday instead. But you can join me at 8 am on Thursday – which is the real feast day, January 6<sup>th</sup> - for Morning Prayer by free conference call. But Epiphany what does it mean to you and to those who created the opportunity to celebrate today? You may choose to associate it with the three wise men or the three kings or magi (whichever name you prefer for them.) The Episcopal Church and many of the other churches in this part of the world do that. In the East, the churches see this day as the one to celebrate the Incarnation, the birth of Christ. Either choice connects us to God, and we gather in recognition that God was giving a gift to the world in the birth of though Jesus, God incarnate who came to live on earth with humanity.

Epiphany is definitely about gift giving and the wise men whose journey we remember today brought gifts, three gifts, to the Holy family, at the house where they were then staying. You may know the joke which circulates at this time – the one which says that if they had been women instead of men they would have arrived on time, bought a casserole and some diapers, and cleaned the stable. But I feel sure that Mary and Joseph probably made good use of the gold, frankincense and myrrh in their unexpected sojourn in Egypt. You are probably not exchanging gifts with your family today as you would have done it on Christmas Day – at least with those with whom you gathered. But you can think of this day to remember the gift of God coming to our world as a vulnerable baby; a baby whose life was threatened by a jealous king. God acted in deciding to make an entry into our world as this vulnerable baby boy. But humanity chose to threaten the baby's life even from its start. If you take out your Bible and read the continuation of this 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter in Matthew's Gospel you will read how the Holy family were told by God to flee to Egypt for safety, flee away to prevent the baby from being murdered by a jealous king. It is a little ironic that centuries earlier a jealous Egyptian king/pharaoh had demanded that all the Hebrew baby boys were to be murdered at birth by being drowned in the Nile. Moses' family found a way to save baby Moses, and once grown, God called him into ministry. That was divine intervention of course just as God instructed Joseph to flee with Mary and the baby to Egypt. So here you can see an example of God's gift to humanity and how God intentionally intervened in human life.

Returning to the visit by the wise men and their presentation of precious gifts. You heard there were three gifts, brought by an undisclosed number of people as we don't actually know how big the group was. They brought gold for a king, frankincense for a priest or a holy person and myrrh signifying death. The wise men brought these gifts and gave them to Jesus. As you ponder this, I invite you to decide what gifts you are bringing to Jesus today. You may have pledged to Messiah for 2022 and I hope you did. Did you just pledge the same as last year because it was the easy thing to do, and you felt good about the thought of maintaining that amount of financial support and helping in the ministries of Messiah. Did you consider increasing any of your time or talent or financial support? Maybe you did not commit to any ministry, but could you do so? When you pledge you are making that commitment to God; it's a covenant between you and God. How important is that to you? Only you of course can answer that question. Together Messiah members can make a difference in this community, we do a lot of outreach, and that is good. Maybe you can make a difference in the life of just one other person you do not even know today. You can help him or her in a tangible way or by being a friend who will listen to his or her story. There are many people isolated at this time who would love to have someone to talk with and confide in. Could you be such a person? Connecting with individual people in need was how Jesus did much of his ministry; he almost always connected with one person at a time. However, he also

used his followers, he sent his disciples out in ministry and that could be you today. Have you thought how you could be serving God in the community either with a group or with one other person or even alone?

I said that one aspect of Epiphany was the visit and offering of gifts but there were others too. I invite you to think about what drew those men to baby Jesus. As far as you know they were of the elite of their nations, assumed to be wealthy astronomers or astrologers. They could have sent their servants to find more about this special star but instead chose to venture themselves. There are indeed times when you need to venture out yourself. That might seem the wrong thing to say when you feel you want to hunker down and isolate until the current covid crisis passes – assuming it will do so! But whether you leave home to venture on a ministry or find one you can do from home the invitation today is to ask God as to where and how God is leading you. Today that might be a mystery; you might not know but unless you open your heart to God you cannot find out.

Someone who set out on a life-long journey with and for God was the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He spent his life serving his people, fearlessly standing against apartheid, and thus infuriating much of white South Africa. Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 and was only the second black person ever to receive it. In 1986 he was elected archbishop of Cape Town, the highest position in the Anglican Church in South Africa. In 1994, after the end of apartheid and the election of Nelson Mandela, Tutu was appointed as chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate apartheid-era crimes. His policy of forgiveness and reconciliation has become an international example of conflict resolution, and a trusted method of post conflict reconstruction. He was later the chair of The Elders, where he gave vocal defense of human rights and campaigns for the oppressed. He will be greatly missed as an amazing leader in many aspects of social justice in South Africa. If you have not read, "The Book of Joy" an account of his conversations with the Holiness the Dalai Lama I encourage you to do so. They share an epiphany of their lives, their thoughts and dreams and their hopes for the future.

But not knowing all the answers is another part of Epiphany. While Epiphany means revelation and enlightenment it is also surrounded in mystery. Those men who arrived in Bethlehem had not known where their journey would take them. All they knew was that a special star signified the birth of a baby born to be the king of the Jews and they were prepared to set out themselves for the enlightenment it was to give them. They did not know where they were going other than where the star led them. They did not know the length of their journey, if it would be dangerous, the cost, the difficulties they would experience but they went anyway. It is quite amazing that these men from far away determined to go on their mission. But life is full of mystery and venturing out. If you went to college that was a venture, if you got married that is another, if you raised a family or are in the process of raising one, that is a great venture. If you have made a commitment to follow Jesus Christ that is another venture. Only you can decide how whole-heartedly you are in any of these ventures. You might not have completed college and you might well have switched colleges during your student years. You might have been separated or divorced and then maybe remarried. The children of course grow into adulthood, but you are always a parent. Can you say the same about your life as a follower of Jesus Christ and claim that you have the same level of faith and commitment as you have always had? You do not know what tomorrow and all future tomorrows will bring but you can decide in your heart your commitments. You have commitments to your family, to your work place if you are still working, to the

communities you are connected to and to your Messiah family and to God. Yes, life is full of mystery, but you make choices as to your commitments. Today you are invited to strengthen your commitment to Jesus Christ and pray for an epiphany as to how you will serve in the time ahead.

Epiphany is a word full of meaning. I hope you will find revelation today as to the meaning for you and your life in the days of your life still to come

Amen