

EPIPHANY: A TIME TO PROCLAIM GOD'S LOVE FOR ALL PEOPLE

The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2012

Isaiah 60:1-6
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

Unexpected Visitors

They went into the house,
and when they saw the child with his mother, Mary,
they knelt down and worshiped him.
(Matthew 2:11a, *GNT*)

Who were they, these travelers from the east? In Matthew's Gospel, they are referred to as the Magi (Greek: *magoi*), and most modern English translations render the term as "wise men" since the Magi were deemed to be learned men who studied the heavens. These Gentile visitors "who came from the East to Jerusalem" may have come from Persia, Mesopotamia, or Arabia.

As men who studied the stars, the astrological sign they observed would have led them to interpret "the star in the east" as indicating the birth of an important figure. In this case, these wise men did more than study this unusual phenomenon in the sky; they took action and decided to follow the star. The first-century "hearers" of Matthew's Gospel may have recalled the oracle as recorded in Numbers 24:17 (*GNT*), "...A King, like a bright star, will arise ... Like a comet he will come from Israel."

According to Matthew, the arrival of these unexpected visitors at the palace of Herod, and their search for an infant king, aroused Herod's suspicions. Word of the birth of a new king and the Magi's desire to pay homage to him was not received by the reigning Judean king as welcome news. Matthew tells us that Herod "was very upset, and so was everyone else in Jerusalem" (2:3b, *GNT*).

Did Mary and Joseph have any foreknowledge that such distinguished visitors were planning to drop in on them, unannounced? As travelers from afar, their arrival at Mary and Joseph's home would have called for Mary and Joseph to extend hospitality to their guests. Did Mary need to quickly prepare a meal? Did Joseph need to provide water and food for their camels? Matthew's Gospel is silent as to the manner in which Mary and Joseph may have received their visitors. The focus, instead is on the actions of these wise men who were filled with joy when they saw the star that would guide them to their desired destination. And upon their arrival, they "knelt down and worshiped" the child

Jesus and presented him with “their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh” (2:11b, *GNT*) – treasures befitting a king.

The season of Epiphany concludes the “Christmas cycle” which began with the season of Advent, four Sundays prior to Christmas. The Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord follows the twelve days of Christmas. Epiphany, a Greek word that means “appearance” or “manifestation” or “to make known,” focuses on God’s presence made known to all the world as revealed in Jesus the Christ. The key message of Epiphany is affirmed in today’s epistle reading from Ephesians: “Because of his love God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children” (1:4b, 5, *GNT*).

From Bethlehem’s stable our gaze is now redirected outward to all the world as we spread the good news of hope and salvation ushered in by the birth of the Savior. We journey in faith, guided not by a star, but by the true Light that has come into the world, trusting the promise foretold by the prophet Isaiah: “The brightness of his presence will be with you” (60:2b, *GNT*).

In this new year, let us be open to the unexpected ways God may come to us, and to the surprising “treasures” that await us to enrich our faith.

The Reflection for the Epiphany of Our Lord was prepared by Barbara Bernstengel who served, until retirement, as on the staff of American Bible Society as Director of the Education Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. Barbara continues as a valued consultant to ABS.

+ + +

On this day we remember to pray and praise God for his glorious grace and for the gift of Jesus, God’s own dear Son, who is Immanuel – God with us. Lord God, just as a star led seekers to the newborn king, lead us in faith by the true Light who has come into the world for all people. Amen.

Activity Corner: “Treasures” for Jesus

Supplies needed: Bible; pens or pencils; construction paper (assorted colors); crown pattern (about 4” wide/3” high); scissors; glue or paste; large box covered with gold wrapping paper.

Read together Psalm 72. Consider reading it as an antiphon (men/boys reading odd-numbered verses and women/girls reading even-numbered verses), or reading it responsively (leader reading odd-numbered verses and everyone else responding with the even-numbered verses). The psalm is a prayer for a king to rule with justice and righteousness. Encourage members of your household to discuss ways in which they can advocate for justice and help those who are in need.

Throughout the Epiphany season (about six and a half weeks, concluding with the commencement of Lent), gather “treasures” for a soup kitchen or shelter in your community. Cover a large box with gold wrapping paper and decorate the box with “crowns” made from construction paper. Encourage members of your household to

donate non-perishable food items, toiletry articles (such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap), and clothing items (such as gloves, socks,) to be given to a designated charity in your community. Before the box is sealed, enclose a prayer for those who will receive these “treasures,” based on Psalm 72.