

### 1.9.22 (Epiphany Observed)

I remember vividly being five years old at a Home Depot with my grandparents, and walking away because I wanted to look at something interesting. I got lost, and my grandparents were furious with me, as were my parents when they found out. I could not understand why they were so upset about my being lost. I knew where I was, I had things under control, what was the big deal? Of course, now that I have children of my own, and frequently imagine what it would be like to lose one of my own children in a crowded place, I do not see it the way I did as a five year old. My grandparent's anger, fear, and frustration with me then makes perfect sense to me now, because nothing has changed my perspective in life as much as having children. My past history, my present, and my future are all interpreted in completely new ways from the way they were before I had children, in more ways than one.

That is exactly how the Epiphany season works. The Epiphany season is a season when we mark and recognize a series of events in the life of Jesus Christ that completely reinterpret and make sense of who God is, what God has done previously in history, and so what God promises to do for us in our future. The particular events highlighted in the Epiphany season mean that we can never look at God, ourselves, or God's history with humanity in the same ways again. Today, we have moved the readings from Epiphany, which is always observed on January 6, to observe them today, on what should be the first Sunday of Epiphany. Unfortunately, that means we are not observing the Baptism of our Lord, though that is one of the great events that speaks with tremendous clarity to who God is for us in Jesus Christ. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus are both observed on the same day.

Today in the Epiphany readings, the staggering truth that changes our understanding of who God is the truth that God is God for Jew and Gentile alike. Sometimes Christians think that

God has a series of plans and back-up plans, which were activated because Israel was stubborn and did not listen, until God became so frustrated that He finally embraced the Gentiles through Jesus Christ. On Epiphany, we see that this is by no means the case. God has always been God for the nations. God is for Israel, not to be against the rest of the world, but in order to reach the rest of the world. St. Paul says in his letter to the Church in Ephesus, “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” This inclusion of the Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation is foreshadowed in both our reading from Isaiah, and our selection from Psalm 72. This eternal plan of salvation for all people is revealed in a startling way by the visit of the Magi to the Holy Family, as told in the Gospel of St. Matthew.

Sometimes we approach this story of God’s inclusion of the Gentiles and wonder how the Jews of Christ’s time could miss something that seems so obvious to us. If you are asking that question, ask yourself how easy it is for you to forgive people who have wronged you. We have glossed over many of the challenges of the story of the wise men from the East because of its familiarity, but these wise men from the East are not obvious friends of God, or God’s people. They look like enemies of God, and enemies of Israel. To begin, to be from the East means they are likely from Babylon, Persia, or Assyria, and at the very least represent one of the great Empires that diminished and destroyed God’s people throughout history.

The word translated as “Wise Men,” is the word “Magou,” which is where we get the title of “Magi” for these three men. There is only one other place in the New Testament when anyone is called “Magou” or a “Magi,” and it is in Acts 8 when St. Peter has a confrontation with a witch doctor, or sorcerer named “Simon the Magician” or “Simon Magus.” The word “Magi” is linked with magic, and dark magic specifically. In other words, we could just as easily call these three

men coming from Israel's enemies in the East, "sorcerers" or "witch doctors," who are ethnic enemies of God and God's people to begin with. Viewed through the lens of a Jew at the time of Christ, these Magi are without question ancient enemies.

But a question raised by this scene in Matthew's Gospel is, who are the real enemies of God and God's people? On the surface, it should be the three magi, but in reality it is Israel's puppet King, King Herod. King Herod was a member of the Hasmonean dynasty, which was a family of ethnic Arabs who had converted to Judaism in order to gain political authority in Palestine under Rome, not long before Jesus was born. Everyone, and especially Herod, knew that Herod and his line was illegitimate. His horrific decision to slaughter all of the infant children who could fit the description of Israel's new true King provided by the Magi is interpreted by the 1st century historian Josephus as the "horrific act of a blood-stained tyrant who handled everything with pure anger and bitterness, for he knew he was held in contempt by the Jewish people."

If the Magi on the surface appear to be enemies of God while Herod should be a friend of God as the King of God's people, their responses to the arrival of Jesus reveal that this is not at all true. Not only does Herod not receive the news of Jesus Christ's arrival well, but his response places him in the category of one of the great villain's in Israel's history, Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. Who else in history slaughtered infant Israelite boys for fear that they would lose their political power? Pharaoh did, before the Exodus. And it is Herod who is now a new Pharaoh in response to the presence of God in Jesus Christ. In an ironic twist the Holy Family must seek refuge from Israel's King in the land of Pharaoh. Those representing the Ancient Enemies of God, the Magi serving as symbols of Babylon, Assyria, and all of Israel's enemies, bring gifts to

Jesus Christ, while the King of Israel tries to kill him, so that His family must then flee to the original enemy of Israel, Egypt.

It is remarkable and startling that the Magi are capable of receiving the revelation of God in Jesus Christ among them. As incredible as this revelation is, we should be sure to give credit where credit is due. What I mean especially is that in this story we tend to give far too much credit to the wise men for finding Jesus, and way too much credit to the star for leading them to Jesus. Our hymns for Epiphany certainly suggest this is true. I even bristle at the language of our opening collect for Epiphany, “by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth.” This prayer places way too much emphasis on the star, when the star did not in fact lead the Magi to Jesus Christ. The star leads wise men to the court of Herod, the seat of power in Jerusalem, where both nature and human nature tells us kings are born. Nature leads the Magi to the seat of Israel’s power, where the interpreters of Holy Scripture in the Temple tell Herod where to actually find Jesus. Herod then relays this interpretation to the Magi. In other words, it is not the star that leads the Magi to God with us in Jesus Christ, it is Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture points us to God, and nature does not, though we might sometimes stumble nearer to Him in spite of ourselves, as a blind squirrel can sometimes find a nut. The Magi must first come to the wrong place because human reason and nature can only get them so close to God, they must hear God’s Word to find God’s Word in flesh.

In my experience as a Priest, I have found that my stiffest competition on Sundays is always with the outdoors, both in Arizona and in Colorado. Whether it is golfing, or hunting, or fishing, or hiking, or even just eating brunch outdoors; the beauty and grandeur of nature is stiff competition on Sunday morning. I say that as someone who loves to do all of those things. Ever so often, someone will describe their desire to be outdoors in nature on a Sunday as their

preferred manner of “being at church.” To that I say, while we certainly can experience God in the beauty of nature, that is only possible if we first and foremost find Him in Word and Sacrament. It is only through that lens that we properly know God at all. This is precisely the order in which the Magi are able to encounter God upon hearing Scripture’s witness that Christ is born in Bethlehem, and it is the Magi’s ability to receive the news they hear in Scripture that makes them unlikely friends of God. The Magi receive this Epiphany news about Jesus Christ, and are changed, they literally do not walk in the way they walked before. They, and we, can never understand who God is in Jesus Christ the same way ever again.

And this is a theme that will continue in the Epiphany season, that in the life of Jesus Christ, Jesus reveals who God is for us, such that we can never encounter Him as we once did ever again. My favorite hymn of the Epiphany season is one that we are singing today as our Recessional hymn, called “Songs of Thankfulness and Praise.” Songs of thankfulness and praise, Jesus Lord to thee we raise. The theme of this hymn is the theme of Epiphany, “God in man made manifest.” In his life in the person of Jesus Christ, God is revealing himself to us, manifesting himself, in the language of that hymn. This hymn is so significant in the Epiphany season because it highlights and outlines the Gospel readings that we read during the Epiphany season. “Manifested by the star, to the sages from afar.” That would be the readings for Epiphany. “Manifest at Jordan’s stream,” the Baptism that should be today. “And at Cana wedding guest,” that is next week, and so it goes on.

In each and every instance of God manifesting Himself in the man Jesus Christ, outlined so beautifully in that great hymn, we are presented first with a tremendous difficulty. That difficulty is receiving who God really is in Jesus Christ, and not who we believe or desire God to be. God is not who we think He is, He is not who we expect Him to be, but is known in Jesus

Christ. This was hard news for those early Christians who belonged to the family of Israel in particular, but the scandal of it all is universal, it is hard news for us as well. Recognizing this by no means suggests that God's plan and God's ways ever change throughout history. Christian growth and Christian maturity are measured by our ability to know, worship, and follow God as He is, and not as we would wish Him to be. We would always prefer a God who fits our expectations, shares our own agendas, shares our own prejudices, a God who is little more than a projection of ourselves; or some coach, parent, or father figure in our life. That is absolutely not who God is, and every year Epiphany reminds us of this with great clarity. God is made manifest in the man Jesus Christ.

God is not the God of our own making. While this is hard news to receive, it is good news to receive, for only God as we encounter Him in Jesus Christ can save us. No other God is capable or willing to enter into the horrific situation of humanity as we know it to redeem us, and all of creation with us. So as we begin this Epiphany season, a time in the church year that is so easy to overlook because it is sandwiched between Christmas and Lent, I pray that God would open our ears, our minds, and our hearts to receive Him as He really is in His life incredible life, as we prepare for His coming death and resurrection. Amen.