

Epiphany, the Wise Men, and Us

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
Augustana Lutheran Church
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Last Wednesday, January 6, was the Day of the Epiphany, a Day of some importance in the life of the Church, especially those portions that Celebrate that day in the same manner as we celebrate December 25th. The Day of the Epiphany, January 6, was originally observed as the birthday of Jesus, but over the course of time in the tradition of the Church dominated by Rome a new date of December 25 was established as the day to observe as the birthday of Our Lord. We follow that later custom.

Unless January 6 falls on a Sunday, we hardly give an attention to The Epiphany, so we are using this day as The Sunday of the Epiphany here at Augustana. Epiphany means appearance, manifestation, revelation, and January 6 ushers in a new season in the Church Year: the third season – after the four Sundays in Advent, the 12 Days of Christmas, now the Season of Epiphany. Epiphany announces the Lord God revealed in Christ Jesus; in him was God made manifest.

The Gospel reading reiterated to us the story of the Wise Men who came from afar to offer their gifts and, as the text reads, “paid him homage” (Matthew 2:11). It’s almost like the celebration of Christmas continues. Most crèche scenes include the Holy Family, shepherds and three Wise Men. No Gospel account of the birth of Jesus incorporates both shepherds and Wise Men. However, that does not stop us from including elements of both Matthew and Luke together in one portrayal.

So who are these Wise Men? No one really knows. That’s where we start. In the reading from Matthew, we learned that they came from the East. That’s a big area which offers many possibilities: Persia (now Iran), India, China. We also learned that they were very familiar with astronomy, the study of the stars, and such knowledge gave them importance, not only as scientists of the stars but also as religious leaders of a faith based in astrology. They were considered scholars and priests. In reading Matthew 2, the description of these men from the East does not use the title “King.” How come, then, that we know them as “We Three Kings from Orient Are?” Maybe because that title works better in the poetry of the hymn. Can you imagine trying to sing, “We Three Wise Men from Orient are?”

The first reading this morning from Isaiah 60 includes these words: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:3) and “They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord” (Isaiah 60:6). Christians applied these words to the visit of the Wise Men, for they fit the identification of the three as kings.

Another observation from the reading from Matthew is that the number of visitors from the East is not given, only the identification of the three gifts. Assuming that each gift was brought by one of the visitors, we concluded that there were three Wise Men; and we even give them names – Casper, Melchior, and Balthasar. These names appear first about 500 years after the birth of Jesus, the Christ. They are not scriptural.

The significance of these visitors in the Church revolves around their being Gentiles – the first beyond Judaism who worshiped the baby Jesus, the first of the Gentile world to acknowledge and bow before this One who is the Savior available to all people. It is Matthew, who at the very end of his Gospel, depicts the resurrected Jesus commissioning his disciples by saying, “Go and make disciples of all nations...” (Matthew 28:19). The thrust of the visit by the three dignitaries declares that Jesus came to all and for all, not just for some.

Matthew’s Gospel tells of a star that led the Wise Men. The light of a star was their guide. The light of that star was not so bright as to illuminate the whole landscape, but it was enough to guide them on their pilgrimage. But they still needed help to find the exact place. Their first stop was in Jerusalem – the center of politics, religion, and commerce. No doubt, they assumed that anything of major importance would emanate from the capital. But what they were looking for was not in Jerusalem, rather in the small village of Bethlehem, approximately eight miles south of Jerusalem. After their detour to Jerusalem, they continued their journey until the star “stopped over the place where the child was” (Matthew 2:9).

A star in the sky led the Wise Men to the Light of the world. We bask not in the beams of a star, but in the brightness of God’s full Light – a Light no darkness can overcome. The dark can be scary, for darkness limits our sight, frightening things happen in the dark, and danger lurks in darkness. There is also the darkness within – ignorance, hatred, fear, selfishness, arrogance, and the like. The Light of Christ illuminates our lives, shows us the love of God, helps us perceive the will of The Father who desires reconciliation, restoration, and redemption for creation. The Light of Christ showers the gift of forgiveness upon us. The Book of Revelation comforts its readers by reiterating the all pervasive gift of the Light of the Lord this way: “There will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light...” (Revelation 22:5).

What a beautiful description of God’s power, presence, love, and care. We turn to these words for encouragement, hope, and consolation. The imagery of light assures us of the gift of the resurrected Christ who promised to never leave us. The Light of Christ is with us always.

The Light is not only comforting, but it is also searching. Our sin is so much more easily exposed when seen in the Light of Christ, for our self-centeredness, greed, false pride, and conceit cannot be hidden from the Light of Christ. It’s all exposed.

Mary Ylvisaker Nilsen's A Time for Peace, is a daily devotional book based on the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The brief devotion for May 10 reads as follows:

Doing the Fourth Step, the fearless moral inventory, is like walking around a dark room lighting one small candle at a time. Each flame gives you enough light to see the next candle. Little by little, the light spreads to even the darkest corners. When we begin lighting up this room of our lives, we discover all kinds of things we had not known before, some good and some bad. There is a crack in the wall, a floorboard missing, nails sticking out, old papers and garbage lying in a heap. But there are also areas already neat and decorated with beautiful, hand-carved wood, and corners filled with potential just waiting for a creative touch.

Our Creator desires to give us light to see ourselves because it is as harmful to leave what is good in the darkness as it is to hide what is bad. Our spiritual journey is dependent on this kind of honest knowledge of self – all that is good and all that is bad.

A Time for Peace: Daily Meditations for Twelve-Step Living
By Mary Ylvisaker Nilsen, published by Zion Publishing, 1990

The Light of Christ both comforts and disturbs. That Light reveals our flaws, shortcomings, disobedience, and fears, but it also casts on us the forgiveness and mercy of the Lord Jesus. This One whom the Wise Men worshiped grew to become the only One who delivers us from sin and grants us salvation. The Light of Christ not only penetrates to the core and calls us to our own moral inventory (we name it confession); it also cleanses and renews (we name that forgiveness).

The Wise Men were among the first to be graced by this unique gift from the Lord God Almighty. We are blessed to receive that gift again today. The Epiphany – revelation – of the Lord happens again to us, for we have received grace upon grace in spite of ourselves. We thank the Lord for sending us the Light of Christ who is so very gracious, kind, and full of compassion to us and for all. Amen.