

January 5—Epiphany Sunday

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

Fit for a King Epiphany Sunday

This stand-alone service is an opportunity for the church to celebrate the Light that shines in the darkness. The chief symbols are the kings or magi of Matthew's Gospel account and the star that they followed to worship the one born as Savior of the world. It is good to dwell on this amazing gift and to wrap up the Christmas season on this twelfth night. Maybe the church could serve some king cake in honor of the travelers from afar.

Planning Notes

[EPIPHANY -Year A](#)

By Cynthia Wilson

Introduction

The word *Epiphany* comes to us from the Greco-Roman context. Originally, the word functioned as a designation for the **public** appearance (or the ***epiphaneia***) of state officials in provinces. The literal meaning is *to manifest, show forth, or clarify*. Based on this definition, the first-century church embraced the term as a designation for the manifestation, the brilliant appearance of Christ, in the flesh for the world. This helps us understand why the Season of Epiphany follows the Season of Advent. The Messiah has come, and we now find ourselves in the season of illumination. I like to think of it as ***a divine dispensation of supernatural sightings***.

The canonical gospels describe an unusual sighting of a resplendent star in the eastern skies that served as a guiding light for a distinguished group of foreigners seeking to locate the long-awaited messianic presence, the king of the Jews!

Herod, threatened by the news of this new so-called king, assumed that the distinguished men from the east possessed magical powers, and secured their services to seek out the child. Meanwhile, Herod was determined to destroy the child. Matthew 2 refers to these visitors as *magi* (from the word *magic*). It is thought that this title was given to Zoroastrian or Persian priests. (During this period in history, astrology, science, and religion were collaborative studies.)

Other gospel writers named them as wise men (*men of great learning*); still others labeled them as kings. Costly gifts were laid at the feet of the Messiah by these immigrants: frankincense from Sheba, gold from Arabia, and myrrh from Tarse and Egypt.

In the Latino/a context, Epiphany is known as Dia de los Reyes (Three Kings' Day). In Mexico, crowds gather to taste the Rosca de Reyes – Kings' bread. Much like the King Cake experience in New Orleans during the season of Mardi Gras, a Baby Jesus figurine is hidden in the bread.

During the month of January, the primary goal is for people of faith to connect with *the new things*, fresh new beginnings, new opportunities provided by God for the people of God, who, in turn, embody the earthly presence of Christ, light of justice, reconciliation, peace, and liberation.

Primary Symbols of Epiphany:

Altar Light: star-shaped crystals; kerosene lamp; candles; menorah holding red/black/green candles – colors of liberation that point toward the birthday celebration of Dr Martin Luther King.

Processional: Three beautifully wrapped gifts denoting the gifts of the magi might be processed into the worship space and placed on the altar. Be intentional to create an ethos of diversity, much like the magi (multigenerational, male/female, multicultural, etc.).

Water: The Sunday after Epiphany is the Baptism of Our Lord, a time of reaffirmation of baptism (John 1: 29-42). The altar table might be covered with various shapes, sizes, and colors of bowls, pitchers, and shells filled with water. Tree branches may be added for a ritual of sprinkling during the Service of Remembrance.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION and PARDON

Merciful God, as we come to you at midday, we have gathered ourselves for the days of work ahead.

But we know that in the true light of day, you can see what we've hidden and covered up.

We confess that we have denied water to those in need; we have polluted streams and lakes; we have played it safe, staying clear of the forbidden places that we pass on our way to somewhere more important to us, forgetting that we carry your Spirit, your Spark, your New Life within us, and that you are found when we veer off the track.

Have mercy on us, O God, for we are sorry for all we have done in forgetting that we belong to you.

Help us to live in the Spirit's power and in the light of your love. through Jesus Christ. Amen!

Prayer of Confession and Pardon © 2011 Susan Colton (Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Master of Divinity Student)

Adapted by Cynthia A. Wilson. *Permission granted for one-time use, for worship and educational purposes.*

Preaching Notes

Epiphany was one of the three great festivals of the early church: Easter, of course, Pentecost, and then Epiphany. Christmas was a minor observance in the cycle of celebrations, at least according to some. In fact, the nativity of Christ was wrapped up with the theophany or the revelation of God incarnate in the observance of Epiphany. Some traditions celebrated for eight full days after the Epiphany. "Epiphany Eve" or more properly "Twelfth Night" was celebrated on the fifth and launched a grand week of feasting. Today, Epiphany barely gets a nod because of the juggernaut that is Christmas in our culture. But even a casual reading of the history and observance of Epiphany is an eye-opening experience for most modern-day U.S. Christians.

There is plenty in the Gospel text for this week that we'll get to in a moment, but it might be appropriate for the preacher to spend some time on the history and meaning of Epiphany itself. The preacher might want to engage the congregation in some of the various ways that the holy day has been celebrated in the past, such as the blessing of water (that's where those polar bear swims began), the king's cake tradition (consider replacing the usual donuts with slices of king cake), and – my favorite – the chalking of the door (www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/an-epiphany-blessing-of-homes-and-chalking-the-door).

We are advocating setting the Epiphany celebration aside from a series, so that it can stand alone with its rich liturgical heritage and deep theological content. It is a celebration of the mystery of incarnation and the light that breaks into the darkness. Epiphany means "the light shines forth" or "the light is made manifest." Here's the wonder, not just that God became flesh in a unique and powerful way, but that it was seen.

And who saw? **Matthew** calls them "magi." Who were they? How many of them came? Where did they come from? We don't know. We've made guesses over the years. We've looked at hints from the Hebrew Scriptures, like Balaam in the Book of Numbers (chapter 24), who was summoned "from the East" to curse Moses, but instead gave a blessing. Psalm 72 speaks of

kings bringing gifts and bowing down before the king of righteousness, which is how, some argue, the magi in Matthew's Gospel became kings of tradition. And we assume there were three kings because there were three gifts; no one really believes the "that gift is from both of us" line we use sometimes! But the truth is, we don't know who they were.

Perhaps Matthew wasn't all that concerned about their identity. Maybe the intent was to bring two groups of "wise men" into the story to see different ways of reacting to the action of God breaking into human history. R. Alan Culpepper plays with this idea in *Feasting on the Word, (Year A, Volume 1*, pp. 213-217). The magi are compared and contrasted with the chief priests and scribes that Herod calls together. The magi are traveling, seeking something they know nothing about. The scribes and priests have knowledge, but they aren't seeking. They don't move from their comfortable seats of wisdom and leadership, even when presented with the news that fits the knowledge they claim to prize. Knowing and seeking aren't necessarily the same thing.

Then we have to pay attention to the one who sought wisdom, the one who consulted both groups, the seekers and the knowers. Whatever you want to say about Herod, you have to acknowledge he saw some truth. And the truth was that his power was under threat. The status quo was about to be overturned. He was frightened, Matthew tells us, when the magi arrived and started asking questions. It only got worse as his knowledge grew. If you continue reading after the end of the assigned text, then you get a sense of just how threatened Herod was by this news; how threatened he was by the light that was seen beyond the borders of his power. It is sobering, even in the post-holiday glow, to consider how an empire might react to a challenge to its grip on the people.

When the light is seen, when a glimpse of what is possible is given, when a vision of the depth of love God has for all of creation is revealed, then there is only one proper response. Matthew tells us that the intent of the magi from the very beginning was to worship. "We have come to pay him homage," they declared to the troubled courts of Jerusalem. And when they get to where the child resides, the first thing they do is worship. It is only after worship that they get to the gifts.

Gifts need to wait. Here's a fun idea. Tell your congregation that they must wait to give and receive gifts until January 6 next year. I'm sure they'll be on board with that! Maybe not. But it is certainly appropriate to emphasize that the magi didn't travel from wherever they traveled just to give the baby some gifts. No, theirs was a journey to worship, to fall on their faces to worship the one who was a light to all the world. Remember, they were outsiders; they were the ones who saw. The insiders, the ones who knew, never bothered to look. The magi came to worship.

Then they gave. As a response to the one, they worshiped. As a way of extending their worship, making it tangible, they gave something of their hands and their hearts. The giving of gifts is a precious thing, but it comes as a way of sealing what they have already poured out. The gift is an act of gratitude, a celebration of a relationship, a sign of the condition of the heart. A gift

always points beyond itself to the person giving and the person receiving. And the magi remind us that in this incarnational moment, we are something of both, receivers who want to give.

Opening their treasures – as we open our hearts when we give – they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; gifts fit for a king, at least this king. “Gold was precious, worthy of a king; frankincense was incense, worthy of a divinity; and myrrh was a spice used in burials” (Culpepper, 215). Royalty, divinity, sacrifice – a summation of the life this light came to live before us, to reveal to us, and to invite us into.