

Feast of the Epiphany
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA

6 January 2019

It is good to be back to work after taking two weeks off for a much needed rest. Walking the foot of the Appalachian mountains in Northern Georgia is truly a magical experience. The imposing water falls, the ancient trees, the steep inclines on muddy red Georgia clay, the fog, and the cool weather combined to provide us with an almost surreal experience. It was beautiful in a way that can seldom be described with words. This type of beauty envelops you, seeps into every pore of your being, and transforms you from the inside out. As I breathed the cool, clean, unspoiled air, I let my mind wonder about the thousands of people who walked those trails in the millions of years they have existed. I soon began to wonder about their lives, their dreams and aspirations, their fears, their anxieties, their understanding of God and their understanding of the world. And, as I was lost in thought, a clear realization came to mind. God has been in those mountains since before the Spaniards or British entered the American continent. God has been present in the imposing views, the many living creatures, and the water falls.

Today we celebrate the feast of sudden, life-changing, realizations. Epiphany means revelation, discovery, unveiling, manifestation, realization, the discovery of new truth, the appearing of a new reality. Today we celebrate the revelation of God's Son to three strange men from the East who followed a star to the birthplace of the Messiah. The narrative today tells us a few important things: They were foreigners, they understood astrology and were acquainted with the stars, which explains the title "Wise Men". They saw a new star and decided to follow it because they believed this star would lead them to a child who would be king of the Jews. Understandably, they came to Herod, the actual King of the Jews, who directed them to Bethlehem. They followed the star and Herod's instructions and found the child in Bethlehem. This visitation happened at some point after the birth because by now the young family is in a house and no longer in the stables. We don't know whose house, but it is clear that things have changed for the family. After finding the family, the "Wise Men" pay him homage and present him with gifts of gold, incense and costly perfume. After their visitation, they returned to the East by a different route because a dream revealed to them Herod's true intentions.

We who know the story well, know that the "Wise Men" were indeed very astute in leaving by a different route. The Gospel tells us that Herod was afraid that the birth of the Messiah would mean the end of his royal line. For this reason, he orders the execution of all male children born within two years of this time. He sought to kill the baby, which forces the young family to flee to Egypt until Herod dies a few years later. After the death of Herod, the young family settled in Nazareth, in the region of Galilee.

This is not the first revelation of God's Son we see in the infancy narratives. We remember the story of the Shepherds in the fields. God reveals his Son to undesirables. Now, he reveals his Son to foreigners. To any observant Jew, these narratives carry a subtle criticism against the Empire, the teachers of the Law, and the ruling class of Israel at the time. God chooses to reveal his Son to the outcast and the non-Jew before he reveals his Son to his own people. Perhaps the new truth being discovered today is not so new after all. Isaiah envisioned a Messiah who would bring all the nations into the family of God. Through Messiah nations would flock to God's light and kings would gather together to pay homage to him. Isaiah says, "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons will come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurse's arms." (Isaiah 60:1-6). The truth revealed today is that, through the visitation of these wise men, the prophecy begins to be fulfilled. The nations, the foreigners, have come to the brightness of God's glory.

Now, let us say a bit more about these wise men. Popular mythology has called these men "magicians" and "kings". Matthew does not use either of these words, rather he calls them "Wise Men", which most likely means, "Men who could read and interpret the movement of the stars." The word "Astronomers" may be closer to the meaning of "Wise Men" than magicians or kings. The word we know as "Magi" is the plural of the Greek word "Magoi", which at the time of Jesus is a title used for Zoroastrian priests. Zoroastrianism, according to several biblical commentators, was the religion of the Persian Empire before Islam (S A. Nigosian, *The Zoroastrian Faith: Tradition and Modern Research*, 1993). This ancient religion, which still exists in Iran believed a few important things that would sound familiar to Christians today:

Zoroastrians believe that Zoroaster, (the founder of the faith) was miraculously conceived in the womb of a 15-year-old Persian virgin. Like Jesus, Zoroaster started his ministry at the age of 30 after he defeated all Satan's temptations. He predicts that other virgins would conceive additional divinely appointed prophets as history unfolded. Zoroastrian priests believe that they could foretell these miraculous births by reading the stars. Like the Jews, Zoroastrian priests were anticipating the birth of the true Savior. (Niveen Serras, WorkingPreacher.com).

Most likely, these "Wise Men" were priests who, like the Jewish Prophets, were awaiting the birth of the true Savior. When they follow the star to Jesus's birth place, they recognize this Jewish baby as the Savior they were looking for and they payed him homage, they accepted him, they believed he was the one, and they went home rejoicing. God has chosen to reveal his Son to them and, I presume, this great privilege transformed the rest of their lives forever. The Scriptures do not tell us what happened to these priests after they returned home, but I like to imagine that these men became some of the earliest disciples of Jesus the Messiah, even if they were not around when Jesus began his public ministry.

We are very blessed that we too have been chosen by God to be witnesses of the birth of his Son. Every year we are invited to approach the humble stable to look in. We are gathered as shepherds in the field and we are told about God's plans for the salvation of the world. We also have an advantage over these "Wise Men" in that we know the rest of the story. We know who this baby will become. We know what this baby will do for us at the appointed time. We are blessed that God's revelation has been given to us through his Holy Scriptures and through the teaching of his Church.

There is a danger, however, in our familiarity with the story. It is possible for us to look at the childhood narratives of Jesus as one would look at a copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. We know the plot, we love the story, we remember the musical, we can sing the songs by memory, and we know how the story ends. But, this is not how the Gospel writers want us to look at this story. The story of Jesus is not literature, but revelation. God reveals himself to us through this story. He tells us something about who he is, about his identity, about his vocation, about his plans, about his dreams and aspirations, about the ultimate goal of history. And this revelation given to us long ago, continues to unfold in our hearts. God continues to speak to us through it even today. This is not a story about characters in First Century Palestine. This is a story about us today, here and now, in our present condition, in our current situation. God continues to choose us as the recipients of his revelation. He is telling us something important about himself and about his Son. He has chosen us, as he chose foreigners and undesirables over 2,000 years ago. This revelation, this unveiling, this introduction of his Son to the world, tells us something unique and wonderful today.

I encourage you to open your ears and your hearts and to let God speak to you in your heart through this narrative. These men from far away come to pay our Messiah homage. Are we willing to pay him homage today? What gifts do we bring for him today? What does gold, incense, and expensive perfume would look like today? How can we demonstrate that we love this child and are willing to dedicate our lives to the service of the man he will become? How do we show our devotion and gratitude for what this baby will one day do for us?

May God's revelation in his Son transform you today. May you come to realize that God has always been present in your life and that this alone has blessed your life. May you realize that God intends to remain in your life forever, which means that your life will be blessed forever. May you come to realize today how much God loves you and learn to accept yourself. May 2019 be a year of forgiveness and acceptance. Amen.