

Feast of the Epiphany 2020

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Thank you so much for having me this evening, and thank you so much for being here, on the first of what I hope will be many more Holy Day collaborations.

The Feast of the Epiphany, as its own feast day is nearly forgotten about - so much so that most churches (and even bishops?) simply shoe it in to whatever Sunday is nearest.

Cramming Epiphany in with Christmas isn't just a feature of the present day church: on peoples lawn last month we saw Presents and Santa and Reindeer and Mary and Jesus and 3 Wise Men and Snoopy flying a plane, smooshed together in a colorful and festive array.

This is in part, not because of inflatables (which I love by the way), but because - retailers lump all of these things together. Christmas is one big event that ends sometime between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Anyone working a seasonal section of retail on Christmas day can tell you they were putting the finishing touches on Valentines day candy and props.

Advent gets totally skipped - I feel like the grinch over at my Trinity when I fight the creche and Christmas tree in early Advent. And unfortunately, by the time Christmas actually begins, everyone is ready to move on. And by move on I don't mean on to Epiphany.

Now, it isn't too hard to see why Epiphany gets swallowed up in Christmas - at Christmas we witness and relive the miracle of the Incarnation, God made flesh. Epiphany in Greek (which I won't pretend like I can pronounce), means "manifestation" or "showing forth." Two views of the same mystery.

The tradition of celebrating Epiphany actually began in the 3rd-century in the Eastern Church. There was no Christmas celebration on December 25th. And, there is no December 25th Christmas to this day - the Eastern Church also squishes multiple elements together on their celebration of the Incarnation. In fact, there are 4 celebrated manifestations of them - four different ways that God is “shown”.

The first is in the artistic tradition, where the three shepherds visit the stable. Shepherds were the lowest social class in Palestine, and for this very reason they were usually presented as being the *first* to see and worship Jesus. These shepherds bring 3 gifts: a shepherds pipe (like Orpheus, Christ would draw all to him), a shepherd’s crook (because Jesus would be the Good Shepherd), and a lamb (foretelling his death on the cross as the Agnus Dei, the sacrificial Lamb of God.)

The second is the tradition I think we are most familiar with: the Three Wise Men - Three Magi who were led to the Christ Child from their homes in Persia by a new star. I can’t help but note that in canonical scripture, there were 3 gifts. So we don’t really have any compelling reason to think that “The Three Wise Men” were men, that there were in fact three of them, or that they were even that wise. But in any case, the gifts are understood as follows: Gold was a symbol of Christ’s kingship, frankincense (something used in worship much like what we have right here) as a symbol of Christ’s divinity, and myrrh, (a fragrance used in embalming), foretelling Christ’s crucifixion, death, and burial.

The third epiphany, we in this church celebrate this coming Sunday - the manifestation of Christ at his baptism. This event is also referred to as a Theophany, or (“A Manifestation or Epiphany of God”), since the whole Holy Trinity was on display that day: the Father in the voice, the Son in the flesh, and the Holy Spirit as a dove.

The last element of epiphany, exactly one year after his Baptism (according to legend anyway,) Jesus changed water to wine at the wedding at Cana.

That is a lot - so, what is Epiphany about? All of these things - shepherds, a baby in a manger, a caravan of Zoroastrian Priests, the opening of the heavens at Jesus Baptism, and the first official miracle: Jesus turning the water into wine.

The purpose of gazing upon these mysteries of God is ultimately to awaken in us an awareness of God is being manifested in our own lives. Today. Now. At home. At work. Much like the stories shared tonight, at any given moment, only a few of us can see the star leading the way. It is ok if you can't see the star in your own life right now - as long as you keep looking for it.

The multi-gendered caravan of Zoroastrian priests bringing 3 gifts - I think I'm beginning to see why "Three Wise Men" caught on. The Three Wise men knew what they were looking for, and they were in fact looking. The truth is that they may never have noticed the star and its beckoning if they weren't looking for God to give them a sign in the night sky. Likewise, the shepherds could have ignored the angels. Anyone witnessing Jesus' baptism could have attributed the voice of God to "natural causes." And how many people at the Wedding at Cana realized what had happened to the wine? Just the servants, who were wondering how everything was going to play out.

If we aren't looking into the stars of our own lives, looking for Christ, and the appearing of God - the odds are not in our favor. If we keep our eyes and ears open, who knows what we might see?

Let us then embrace the mystery of the Epiphany, in the hope and in the faith that doing so may sharpen our own eyes and hearts to see God appearing all around us.

Amen.