

Kneel Down and Receive Him

*The Epiphany of Our Lord, observed (8 January 2012)
Saint Matthew 2:1-12*

Dearly beloved, this past Thursday the Christmas season came to a close. For twelve days we celebrated the mystery of the incarnation, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word becoming flesh to save us from our sins. What traditions were part of your celebration? A tree? A stocking? A crèche? Believe it or not, many of the Christmas traditions we do actually stem from our Lord's epiphany rather than His birth. The star on top of the Christmas tree. The lights on the tree. Even the giving of gifts. So let us turn our attention to today's Holy Gospel and learn what our Lord's epiphany means for you and me.

That first night in a stable is now well behind our Lord and His parents. The shepherds have gone back to their flocks. Simeon has held the Christ-child in his arms and is ready to depart in peace. Anna too has rejoiced in His birth. Now the holy family is back in Bethlehem, residing in a rented or relative's house.

Just a few miles to the north, in the capital city of Jerusalem, King Herod is troubled. Nothing new there. King Herod was troubled most of his life. Whenever others became a threat to his throne, he had them killed. Relatives. Mother-in-law. Several sons. Even a wife. That is why all Jerusalem is troubled with him. They know his murderous ways. The news that visitors from the east are looking for a newborn king is sure to bring about more bloodshed. And so, instead of hope there is fear. Instead of news of the Messiah's mercy, there is news of Herod's wrath.

The magi from the east were magistrates who studied the heavens. When God's special star caught their attention, they searched their writings and discovered that centuries earlier the prophet Daniel had taught their forefathers that **“a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”** (Number 24:7). So they packed up and headed westward. It's interesting that God sent these magi the light of a special star to lead them westward, and yet that star later becomes hidden for a time. That's why these magi go to Jerusalem. They assume that's where they will find the newborn King. After all, the king's palace is there. So is the temple. Thus, their question: **“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.”**

Herod becomes furious. He is the people's king. Yet, he hides his rage so that he might learn more about this new threat, and inquires of the chief priests and scribes where the Christ was to be born. That's an easy one. For God's Word has already answered that question. Who? What? Where? When? Why? All answered in the Holy Scriptures. The entire book is about Him. That's why the religious leaders are quick to answer: **"In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'"**

As you can see, the lesser light (the star) disappeared for a time so that the greater light (Holy Scripture) could shine. And shine it did. God's Word pointed the magi southward to the little village of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was David's hometown, where he grew up as a shepherd. Now this little village boasts another shepherd—the Good Shepherd who will give up His life for the sheep. In this little house of bread, He who is the Bread of life now resides as a little Child. The people's king might reside in Jerusalem, but God's King resides in Bethlehem.

So off the magi went. And behold, the star they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother, and they fell down and worshiped Him. These magi come from the area of paradise lost to see and behold and receive the One in whom paradise is regained. And having received Him, they opened their treasures and offered Him gifts.

Gold, suitable for the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Frankincense, normally burned during the hour of prayer, suitable for the great High Priest of our salvation.

Myrrh, normally used to anoint a dead body, suitable for the Lamb of God who was born to die that we might be born again in Him.

Three prophetic gifts, given in response to the greatest gift ever given. That is what faith does. First it receives. It receives God's good gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ. Then it gives. It gives praise to God and love to the neighbor.

What have your gifts confessed about your faith?

How do you put to use the time, talents, and treasures God has entrusted to your care?

What does your daily life profess about your Savior?

Are you more like the chief priests and scribes, content with knowledge of the facts, or the magi, willing to seek the Christ where God has promised Him to be found?

Is your baptism a distant memory confined to a photo album, or something you daily and joyously live?

Is God's Word collecting dust on the bookshelf, or do you daily read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest it?

Is the sacrament of our Lord's body and blood just a bland and stale practice, or do you faithfully hunger and thirst for what our Lord desires you to receive regularly?

Being a Christian is so much more than a few certificates in your scrapbook, a cross around your neck, and a word on your Facebook profile. Being a Christian is something you are from head to toe, from body to soul, for it is a daily dying to sin and rising to new life in Jesus Christ.

The wise men forsook all and sought Jesus because they recognized their need for Him. I pray you do the same, day after day. You need not worry where to find Him. He is where He has always been—in the same Word that led the magi to the infant Christ. Here, robed in Word and Sacrament, is your King, infant though He be, come out of eternity into time to bring you out of time into eternity (Gerhard).

This Jesus is your Jesus, dear friends. He is your forgiveness, your life, your salvation. So follow the magi and leave behind all that would keep you from this Bethlehem, where Christ comes to dwell with you. Sit and listen to His Word. Stand to speak to Him. Kneel down to receive His good gifts. And then return home in the grace and knowledge that you are God's beloved child. You may not have traveled hundreds of miles to get here this morning, but the Christ you are even now receiving, beholding, and adoring in His Word is the same Christ worshiped and adored by the wise men.

That is what our Lord's epiphany means for you. May every Christmas star, every string of Christmas lights, and every exchange of gifts remind you of Him who is

the Light of the world. He is the Father's gift to you and me and every sinner. Behold, your Savior. Kneel down and receive Him. Happy Epiphany!

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Jesus Christ unto life everlasting.

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