

A Light to the Nations©

Matthew 2:1-12

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Here we are ... the next to the last day of the Christmas season. Do you have your Christmas stuff put away? No signs of Christmas left? I admit that ours is still up and somehow I feel a little embarrassed about it, but really, it's not that late!

This is the next to last day of the Christmas season! It actually goes from Christmas day to 12 days later – which is Epiphany ... which is tomorrow.

If you saw my post on Facebook this past week, you might have watched the video I posted of “Chuck Knows Church.” Chuck is a United Methodist pastor who creates these humorous but very correct and educational videos about our faith, the Bible, the church. I confess that I'm a little envious because I want to be cool like Chuck and wish I'd thought of doing something like that.

Anyway, Chuck says lots of people think Christmas is over by now and may wonder why in the world we're still talking about the wise men. But it is on Epiphany when we read about and celebrate the wise men's visit to the baby Jesus.

Epiphany means *manifestation*, which means, according to the online Merriam/Webster dictionary: *a* : the act, process, or an instance of manifesting; or something that manifests or is manifest; ...

And manifest means something is readily perceived by the senses and especially by the sense of sight; easily understood or recognized by the mind.

But, why is this story so important for us to hear? What is it that is manifested anyway?

We've been here before and we've heard this story so many times we might be able to tell it without reading it, right?

The wise men – men who study the stars, who are called magi, who are probably wealthy, maybe royals – Gentiles! – come to Jerusalem searching for the newborn king of Israel.

Who can tell me how many wise men (or kings) there were? What does Matthew say?

Actually, Matthew doesn't say. He just says some wise men come from the East, following the star. They go to King Herod and ask where this king is because they saw his star at it's rising and they have come to pay him homage (honor, respect).

Of course, we know by now what Herod does. He asks the Chief Priests and the Scribes where this child would be. Herod was a wise guy too. He knew they could help. And they quoted the prophet, Micah, that said this King would be born in Bethlehem.

Herod was a wise guy, for sure. He cunningly told the travelers from the east where they could find him and asked them to come back so he too could pay his respects.

We know that story by now, don't we? We know the wise men were warned by an angel and went home a different way. We know that Herod was so angry he ordered the murder of children, trying to get rid of the threat of another king.

The whole story of Jesus' birth and life kind of reminds us of the story of Moses. Did you ever think of that? Moses birth was unusual – born of a Hebrew woman at a time when Pharaoh wanted Hebrew babies killed – worried that the Hebrew people would multiply and rise up and over-take the Egyptians.

Moses was protected by his mother by putting him in a woven basket in the water, where Pharaoh's daughter found him and took him home and raised him as her son.

Jesus, too, was born at a dangerous time – a time when the Romans occupied Israel, when Herod was king and was quick to act with violence towards anyone who came up against him.

Jesus – born in a stable – or a cave where animals were kept – whose parents had to flee with him to protect him.

Moses – who became God's instrument for saving God's people – the Israelites who later became known as the Jews.

Jesus – whose very name means "One who saves."

But here is one reason this story in the 2nd chapter of Matthew is so significant for us today. The Israelites (the Jews) repeat their story over and over, telling of God's mighty power to save them. They teach it to their children. They celebrate it every year at Passover. They do everything they can to never forget their story of salvation.

But, we weren't there when God sent the plagues to Egypt so Pharaoh would let the people go. We weren't there that night of Passover when Moses led the people out of Egypt. And we were not there as the Red Sea divided for the Israelites to pass through safely to the other side, away from angry soldiers. We were not there. We are not Jews. That is not our personal story.

THIS is our story! This is the good news that while Jesus, the Son of God, came as a human – a Jewish human – and while God worked through him and his Jewish disciples

– this story of Jesus – is for us ALL. Not just the Jews but for the Gentiles, which includes all of us!

The wise men found the Christ child and they perceived who He was and they knelt down and worshipped him and offered him their best gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh.

The light of God shone in the star and even as Isaiah prophesied in the passage we heard this morning – “Arise, shine! For your light has come.”

Our light has come. The Light of the world. The Light that shines in the darkness that nothing can overcome. The Light that makes known the grace and love of Immanuel – God with us.

An epiphany (with a small e) is when something becomes suddenly clear. We sometimes say, “the light came on.” You’ve seen those cartoon drawings of a person who gets a good idea, and above their heads a light bulb is shining.

But our Epiphany (with a capitol E) means that we’ve seen the Divine Light – we’ve recognized him. We know this is God incarnate – God in Christ. This is the Messiah that the world was promised.

Our Epiphany is that he did not just come for the people who had long been called God’s chosen. He has chosen us all! (Even us Presbyterians who have been called “The Frozen Chosen” sometimes.) We are all of us the reason Christ came to earth.

He came to bring salvation to all people. He came to forgive sins, to pour grace upon grace upon us. He came, including us in baptism in his name and at the table – our Passover – where we tell Jesus’ story – our story – of Jesus saving us from sin and death.

This is more than just an event that happened for us long ago. This is an Epiphany that keeps happening. People all over the world continue to have this Epiphany of seeing in a new way – of realizing who Christ is; of understanding finally that this faith is for them too.

This Light of the World is a Light for all the nations. But it is our story to tell. We are the people whom others didn’t think would fit into the story of the Jewish Messiah – the King of the Jews. Yet we have been included.

It is our story to tell to the nations. It is our privilege to tell it over and over just like the Jews do for Passover – so no one forgets; so our children can tell it to their children; so no one misses the Epiphany.

This year, I'd like for us as a congregation to focus a lot on what it means to be a follower of Jesus – a disciple of Christ, our Lord.

I think one of the first things we are responsible for is to see the Light. To see the Epiphany – that God is among us in Jesus. And to understand that we are loved and that we are called to follow him and to pass on his light to all.

This is our story. And this is our call. To be little lights – extensions of the Light of the World – a light for all the nations.

So be it. Amen.

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