

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

We are still in the season of Christmas — today is the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas ... ten Lords a-leaping, as the song goes. January 5<sup>th</sup> concludes the twelve-day season, and then on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Western church celebrates the Epiphany of our Lord. I've transferred this Feast day to this Sunday.

Just speaking of the Western church signals that there's a difference between the Eastern church and the West. Today, although many in the Eastern church now join the West in celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25<sup>th</sup>, many others in the Eastern church celebrate the nativity on January 6<sup>th</sup>, truly an epiphany, indeed, the great appearance of our God in human flesh.

The Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord has an interesting history. As I just noted, some in the East celebrated Christ's birth on this date. Some celebrated Christ's baptism, another manifestation of Christ's divinity, and others included Christ's first miracle: changing water into wine — both of these theophanies, appearances of God. Still others included Jesus' transfiguration as part of the January 6<sup>th</sup> celebration — still another theophany (Thomas Talley, *Origins of the Liturgical Year*, pp. 117-147).

We see some of these themes in our Epiphany hymnody. Consider LSB394 that speaks of Christ's divinity being “manifest at Jordan's stream,” and “at Cana wedding guest ... manifest in pow'r divine, Changing water into wine.” Of course, these themes are too many all to be pondered on a single day, so we now spread them out over the whole of our Epiphany season.

In the West, the church turned its attention on January 6<sup>th</sup> to Matthew's infancy narrative since it was already celebrating Christ's birth on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In this way, Matthew's infancy narrative was a fitting bookend to the Christmas season. Matthew's account doesn't have the trip to Bethlehem or the lack of suitable lodging. There is nothing of swaddling clothes and mangers, nothing of shepherds and angels. Instead, in Matthew's telling, magi come to visit some time after Jesus had been born. “*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem ... ‘we saw his star when it rose.’*”

Here indeed is another epiphany, as that hymn I made reference to earlier ascribes: “Manifested by the star To the sages from afar.” As Isaiah foretold in our Old Testament lesson, “*And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*” The word there translated “nations” is ἔθνη, which the King James translates “Gentiles.” You can understand how the theme of this feast came to be understood as the “manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles” (Talley, 146).

Not that the message of God's universal salvation was not already part of the story of Christ's birth. Remember the angel said to the shepherds: "*Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all the people***" (Luke 2:10). And when the infant Jesus was brought to the temple, "*behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon,*" who held the infant Jesus in arms, and said "this is the Lord's salvation," "*a light for revelation **to the Gentiles** (ἐθνῶν), and for glory to your people Israel*" (Luke 2:25, 30, 32).

Then in our text from Matthew again, it's "*behold*" ... "*behold, magi from the east*" — not really wise men, as if some interior wisdom brought them to Jesus; most certainly not kings; but magi: magicians, sorcerers, soothsayers, unbelieving Gentiles — "*came to Jerusalem*" in search of the One "*who [had] been born king of the Jews.*" They had been drawn by the light; "*his star*" had risen, and it led them to Jerusalem first, and then to the child Jesus, "*the true light, which gives light to everyone, [who had come] into the world*" (John 1:9).

Let me offer a couple brief comments regarding this star. First, it doesn't act like a star as we know them: huge, gaseous, burning balls that look small only because they are so far away. The magi weren't making a scientific assertion here when they called it a star. They described it as a star because it looked like a star in the sky. Second, there was talk a little before this Christmas of the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction that some were calling another appearance of the Bethlehem star. That may sound plausible for those who want to make of the star in Matthew's narrative a natural phenomenon that can explain away the miraculous. But I don't think so. This light appeared and disappeared and then reappeared again. This light moved in the sky to lead the magi to the home of the child Jesus. That's not natural, whether an actual star or a planet or a conjunction of planets. That's a miracle.

For Jesus is the true "*star ... come out of Jacob,*" the "*scepter [arisen] out of Israel*" (Num. 24:17). That's who Jesus was born to be: God's agent of salvation, the light of the world, the life of men. He is both "*the bright morning star*" and "*the scepter,*" that is, "*the root and the descendant of David*" (Rev. 22:16), "born a child and yet a king" (LSB338:2), who would "*reign over the house of Jacob forever*" (Luke 1:33), but whose coming was to be Savior of all nations to our undying praise forever and ever. (Ps. 45:17), for that's the message contained in the Christmas narrative found in Luke's Gospel or John's or Matthew's: our salvation — a light no darkness can overcome, coming to us who dwell in darkness, giving light to everyone (John 1:5, 9; Isa. 9:2). Thus the Father sent His only Son down from His side into human flesh to save the world.

Thus the Christmas narrative continues today: "*Behold,*" magi come in search of the King. Magi come to Jesus bearing gifts; magi come to "worship Christ, the newborn King" (LSB367). "*Behold,*" Gentiles come to Jesus not by their own

shrewdness, but at God's own beckoning, by God's own guiding, that we might know that the same God, who created the world, also desired to redeem the whole world, Jews and Gentiles — that He desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), that He desires disciples of all nations (ἔθνη) (Matt. 28:19), that He “*shows no partiality, but in every nation (ἔθνει) anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him*” (Acts 10:34-35).

Isn't this why WE celebrate Christ's coming at Christmas? Isn't this the mystery that St. Paul talked about in our Epistle that is being fulfilled in the Christmas narrative: “*that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel,*” that Gentiles are not God's afterthought, but are a part of His “*eternal purpose... realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,*” and that both Jew and Gentiles “*have boldness and access [to the Father] with confidence [only] through our faith in [Christ Jesus]*”?

Yes, as Gentiles came to the light and faith in Christ was spread to them also, purposeful was the Church in continuing the Christmas narrative contained in Matthew's Gospel at the Epiphany, for in it we Gentiles hear of the coming of these Gentile magi and their offering up of kingly gifts of gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. The story of their inclusion in the Christmas narrative is the story of our inclusion in it.

In fact, the Christmas narrative continues for us all year long as we partake of Christ's word and sacraments — not a miraculous star shining in the sky, but “*a lamp shining in a dark place*” producing in us the miracle of faith, the dawning of the day and the rising of “*the morning star ... in [our] hearts*” (2 Pet. 1:19), and as we offer up in response our gifts of our gold, of our bodies as living sacrifices in service of our neighbor, our acceptable worship (Rom. 12:1), of our lips that sing His praises (Heb. 13:15)

Yes, the Christmas narrative continues, which is why we just sang out in joy and can do it all year: “O let the harps break forth in sound! Our joy be all with music crowned, Our voices gladly blending! For Christ goes with us all the way— Today, tomorrow, ev'ry day! His love is never ending! Sing out! Ring out! Jubilation! Exultation! Tell the story! Great is He, the King of Glory!” (LSB395:5).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.