

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Today we’re celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord, although yesterday, January 6th, was the actual Festival. And our remembrance of this festival in the Western Church is marked in our Gospel by the visit of the wise men to the infant Jesus. It’s interesting that in the Eastern Church, the baptism of our Lord is the emphasis. And in some ways, that makes more sense, for there is certainly more of an epiphany, a making known of Jesus as God’s Son, in His baptism than at the visit of the wise men. God making Himself known; we call it a theophany. This theophany was manifest at Jesus’ baptism: God the Father speaking from the cloud and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descending and remaining on Jesus. John the Baptist even bore witness that this was how he recognized that Jesus *“is the Son of God”* (John 1:34).

In other words, that was an “Aha” moment for John the Baptist, for that’s the way we use often the word epiphany today. A sudden realization comes upon you — a sudden illumination, enlightenment — often depicted graphically with a light bulb lighting up above our heads. “I’ve had an epiphany!”

We don’t usually use the word epiphany at Christmas time, but there is no doubt that the shepherds had such an epiphany — an “Aha” moment — when they heard the good news of a Savior born to them who is Christ the Lord.

The “Aha” of our Gospel text today is not as clear — at least to me — but it’s there. There is no grand theophany set before our eyes, no voice from the cloud or dove descending upon the baby Jesus; there is no glorious angel proclaiming the good news or angel chorus singing, *“Glory to God in the highest!”* (Luke 2:14) But there is a star.

A star led the wise men to Jerusalem, where they would inquire of King Herod, *“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.”* Surely these wise men are describing the phenomenon in the only way that they could, but surely this was no star as we know them today from science. We know that the nearest star to our own sun is over 4 light-years away, and no natural star in the sky could have done what is described in our text — leading the wise men first to Jerusalem and then appearing again leading them to Jesus in Bethlehem. No, this event must surely have been God breaking into our world, making known to these star-gazers from the east the coming of the King of the Jews. Here was the theophany.

Of course, the theophany alone would not have been sufficient for these eastern sages to have known the question to ask Herod. How did they know to ask about the King of the Jews? They must have been somewhat familiar with the Scriptures. They must have, at least, known that Moses told of a *“star [that would] come out of Jacob,”* of a *“scepter [that would] rise out of Israel”* (Num. 24:17). Moses was, of course, talking about David’s greater Son, Jesus, the king who would rule an

everlasting kingdom, and when the star rose, the wise men must have put two and two together and traveled to Herod to inquire further.

Now, of course, we know of the coming of these wise men to Jesus to worship Him and offer Him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In fact we might “know” too much about them, even things that aren’t true. For example, we might “know” that there were three wise men — but, of course, we don’t know that for, look in the text — it does not say how many came, nor does it call them by name. It only names the three gifts. We might “know” that they were kings as we sing — but, of course, they aren’t called kings at all, but magi — wise men. We might “know” that the wise men offered their gifts to Jesus on the night when he was born, Jesus still lying in the manger with the shepherds and animals still gathered around, the way our nativity scenes depict it — but, of course, we don’t know that, and it was likely some time after Jesus’ presentation, which we heard about last week, that the wise men came to bow the knee to this infant king. I hope all of this is not an epiphany to you today, but if it is, let this “Aha” sink in.

But what we do know — truly know — is that these wise men were not Jewish scholars. They didn’t know the Scripture well enough to be able to identify the city where the King of the Jews was to be born. They were not Jews. They were Gentiles, and yet the Divine appearance of the star led them to this King. And that leads us to an epiphany, though we’ve already heard it! “Aha!” Jesus came TO the Jews and was born the son of David as king of the Jews, but He did not just come FOR the Jews. He came for the whole world.

We heard it on Christmas Eve as the angels spoke to the shepherds: “*behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for ALL THE PEOPLE*” (Luke 2:10) (παντί τῷ λαῷ). That is, Jesus came for the world, although, to be sure, news of His coming is good news only to God’s people, those who place their trust in Him. Jesus came for the whole world: Jew and Gentile. We heard it last Sunday morning, in faithful Simeon’s praise of the Lord’s “*salvation*” that he held in his arms: Jesus came as “*a light for revelation to the Gentiles (ἔθνων), and for glory to [His] people (λαοῦ) Israel*” (Luke 2:30-32). And we see it here in our Gospel text: led by God, Gentiles come and bow down in worship of the Savior, Christ the Lord.

We hear it proclaimed by St. Paul in our Epistle: “*the mystery hidden for ages in God,*” the “*mystery of Christ, which ... has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.*” And this “*mystery is that the Gentiles (ἔθνη) are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*”

This is our “Aha!” This is our epiphany: that promises made to Israel apply to us who are not Israel — because of Christ; that we who are not sons of Abraham according to the flesh are sons by adoption — because of Christ; that we who are

“*Gentile sinners*” and not “*Jews by birth*” (Gal. 2:15) are not made righteous by the things we do — neither the worship nor the gifts we offer — but in the same way as the Jews are — by faith in Christ Jesus.

This good news for Gentiles is what we heard last week from St. Paul: that because of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, we Gentiles are able to receive adoption as sons and made heirs — heirs of Abraham, “*heirs according to promise*” (Gal. 3:29), “*heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ*” (Rom. 8:17). In this way, then, the distinction between Jew and Greek no longer means anything — “*for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal. 2:28).

Moreover, all this happens as we come to faith in Christ Jesus and as we are baptized into Christ, “*for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ...*” (Gal. 3:26-27).

But could that really be all that there is? “Aha!” Yes! What an epiphany, this mystery revealed to us through “*holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*”: that God desires all mankind to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), that He wants people to listen to His Son (Matt. 17:5) and follow after Him (John 10:27), that He wants disciples from all nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) (Matt. 28:19) — meaning both Jews and Gentiles, and that means us — and so He wants us to be brought to the waters of Holy Baptism.

What a profound mystery we proclaim. “Aha!” It’s another epiphany: that Christ loved His church so much that He would give Himself up for her that he might sanctify her; and that He sanctifies her by Holy Baptism — “*the washing of water with the word.*” What an epiphany: that we, Jew and Gentile, by baptism, have been made members of the same body, Christ’s body, as St. Paul said, “*in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free*” (1 Cor. 12:13). We call it the “mystical union.” “Aha!” What an epiphany! That the promise of Christ, of His Gospel, of His baptism, is not just for the Jews and their children, but even for us “*far off*” Gentiles, “*whom the Lord our God calls unto Himself*” (Acts 2:39).

The theophany of the star may not have been as obvious as the voice from heaven, the dove that descended on Jesus, or even the angelic proclamation, but it was enough to lead the wise men to the infant Jesus, and it is profound enough to lead us to realize: this baby — God in the flesh — came for Gentiles like us. But there are more profound mysteries that shine in our lives — God’s word and His sacraments — not a star shining in the sky, but “*a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts.*” The Lord grant us faithfulness to see in these theophanies the Lord’s work in our lives, that we might rejoice in the mystery saying, “Aha! What an epiphany!”

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