

The Epiphany of Our Lord (Observed)

January 7, 2024

QUESNEL

“Why observe Epiphany?” (Matthew 2:1-12)

So here it is on a Sunday

- and once again we are having the Divine Service theme
 - based on another day.
 - How come? It is not Saturday the 6th
 - The Day of Epiphany.
- What is the big deal about Epiphany
 - that we should have a Special Epiphany Service?”

Well, that is what I’m going to tell you now.

- There are a number of reasons,
 - which I will explain.
 - But first,
 - what are not the reasons
 - for having a special Epiphany service?

1) So that we can have another potluck meal together as many churches do. Now don’t get me wrong, I love potluck meals, but that is not the reason for having an Epiphany service. True, it makes it nice for those who do come for the service, but even though there is no potluck, it is still be worth coming here today.

2) Along the same lines, the reason for having an Epiphany service is not so that we can have people here to take down the Christmas tree. Again, it’s a nice bonus to have folks here to do that, but that’s not the main reason.

3) It is an excuse to have people put another offering in the plate. No, that is not it either.

So if those are not the reasons for having a special Epiphany service,

- what are the good reasons?
 - The Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord
 - is what’s called a fixed-date festival.
 - That means it always falls on a specific date,
 - regardless of what day of the week it is.

- In that way, it is like Christmas.
 - Christmas Day is always December 24/25,
 - so we always have service on that date,
 - no matter what day of the week.
- Likewise, with Epiphany.
 - It is a fixed-date festival.
 - It always falls on January 6,
 - the day right after the twelve days of Christmas.

Not only is Epiphany a fixed-date festival,

- it is also a major festival.
 - It is one of the seven big ones. (Christmas, Epiphany, Transfiguration, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, All Saints)
 - You do not want to omit it.
 - And this goes back many centuries
 - in the history of the church,
 - this observance of Epiphany.
- In the early church,
 - Epiphany had as strong an importance
 - if not more so than Christmas.
 - It was that big of a deal.

But why?

- That is what we will get to now.
 - Our text is the traditional Gospel reading for Epiphany,
 - the visit of the wise men,
 - as recorded in Matthew 2.
- This is the only place we find this account.
 - And today I am going to focus on two key aspects
 - of this Epiphany text that makes it so valuable:
 - first, that it is the Gentile Christmas,
 - and Second, that it is an occasion of great joy.

First, it shows us that Jesus is the Saviour

- not just of the Jews
 - but also of the Gentiles.
 - Often Epiphany has been called “the Gentile Christmas,”
 - and rightly so.
- But what do I mean by that?

- Well, it is often said by religious scholars
 - Of the Christmas Eve service,
 - that “Christmas is a Jewish holiday.”
 - The point being,
 - that when Christ was born at Bethlehem,
 - the angel told the shepherds,
- “Behold, I bring you good news
 - of a great joy that will be for all the people.
 - For unto you is born this day
 - in the city of David
 - a Saviour,
 - who is Christ the Lord.”
- Now that is a very Jewish way to put things.
 - Good news of great joy “for all the people.”
 - And when it says, “the people,”
 - that is referring to the Jewish people.
- Jesus’ birth
 - is the fulfillment of the promises
 - made to Old Testament Israel.
- Likewise,
 - to call Bethlehem
 - “the city of David”
 - and to call the child born there
 - “the Christ”
 - again, these are very Jewish references.
- David, was the great king of Israel.
 - And the “Christ,”
 - meaning the Messiah,
 - the son of David
 - who would usher in an everlasting kingdom
 - is a very Hebrew way of talking about the Messiah.
- Again, that is why scholars over the centuries can say
 - that Christmas is,
 - in the first place,
 - a Jewish holiday.

But where does that leave us Gentiles,

- that is, those of us who are non-Jews?
 - Do we get left out?
 - No, and that is where the Epiphany comes in.

- This is why Epiphany is called the Gentile Christmas.
- Because now the birth of the Christ is revealed,
 - is manifested,
 - as being for us Gentiles too,
 - for our blessing and salvation.

Notice what our text says.

- It says that
 - “wise *men from the east came to Jerusalem.*”
 - And that gives us a clue.
 - These men,
 - the Magi or wise men,
 - were court scholars
 - from a land to the east,
 - most probably a place like Babylon.
- And the question they ask
 - this also indicates they were most likely Gentiles,
 - not Jews.
- Because they ask,
 - “*Where is He*
 - *who has been born King of the Jews?*”
 - The way they put that
 - it sounds like they themselves
 - are not Jews.
- But somehow,
 - They are interested in one
 - born “*King of the Jews,*”
 - the Jewish Messiah.
- This, of course, disturbed
 - King Herod greatly
 - for he claimed that title for himself.

Well, if they themselves were not Jews,

- how would they know about
 - or be interested in one
 - born king of the Jews?
 - Naturally they would go to the one who claimed that title
 - and there they learned
 - that the “King of the Jews” spoken of in Scripture

- was born in Bethlehem.
- They had heard of the promises made to Israel
 - of a Saviour,
 - a Messiah
 - prophecies that had been shared over the centuries
 - to other lands in the Middle East.
- Remember how people from all over
 - had come to hear the wisdom of Solomon?
 - They could have heard of it that way.
- Remember how the tribes of Israel
 - had been dispersed centuries earlier?
 - The people of Judah had been taken captive to Babylon,
 - including Daniel,
 - who became a court scholar
 - a type of Magi himself,
 - serving in the court of the Babylonian king.
- These are ways that wise men from the east
 - could have heard about the promise
 - to Israel of a great Messiah to come,
 - “the king of the Jews.”
- Be that as it may be,
 - God needed them to be there
 - and He displayed His almighty power
 - to make sure they knew their place in His plan
 - and became the messengers of His Word
 - that needed to be spoken.

I need to take a bit of an aside here.

- Many of you know that the Orthodox portion of Christianity celebrate Christmas on January 6th, the same day we celebrate Epiphany. Much has been speculated on the reason why, with some even suggesting that they celebrate the “Gentile” Christmas rather than the “Jewish” Christmas. Much has been suggested of the potential antisemitism possibilities. But the real reason has to do with the Calendar change in 1582 in the Catholic countries and 1752 in the British Empire. On the 24th of Feb the date was updated to the 6th of March to get the calendar back in sync with the Solar rotation. This was called the Gregorian Calendar. The old Julian calendar was maintained by the Orthodox churches and is thus 13 days behind.

So, Epiphany is called the Gentile Christmas.

- The king of the Jews
 - is also meant for us Gentiles.
 - And that is tremendous news!
- We Gentiles,
 - (And here I am assuming that we are not of Jewish lineage)
 - our ancestors,
 - had been in the dark,
 - not knowing the one true God, -----
 - the God of
 - Abraham,
 - Isaac,
 - and Jacob.
- Our gentile ancestors worshiped sacred oak trees,
 - gods of wood and stone
 - and stars in the heavens,
 - not knowing who God really was.
- They were groping around in the dark,
 - offering up sacrifices of their own,
 - trying to appease those gods
 - leading to
 - idolatry,
 - ignorance
 - and lostness.
- But now a great light has been manifested,
 - in the birth of Christ.
 - God wants all nations to know Him.
 - And thus God makes Himself known
 - in the person of Christ.
 - So that is the first point:
 - Epiphany is the Gentile Christmas.

Second, Epiphany is an occasion of great joy.

- The wise men from the east
 - come to Jerusalem
 - looking for the one born
 - king of the Jews.
- But He is not to be found
 - in Herod's palace.
 - Rather, the prophecy says
 - that the Messiah

- is to be born in Bethlehem.
 - So that is where they go.
- And when the star leads directly over the place
 - where the child was, it says,
 - *“they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”*
 - Not just “they rejoiced,”
 - as if they were glad the trip was over.
- Not even, “they rejoiced exceedingly.”
 - As if they were sore from riding those camels. (Riding for cattle)
 - But *“they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”*
 - That is a lot of joy!
 - Joy upon joy piled up to the sky!

These wise men from the east made a long journey,

- hundreds of miles,
 - to have the original Epiphany service.
 - And they did not mind the extra effort.
- Indeed,
 - they brought costly gifts to the infant king
 - gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
 - And they counted it all as joy!

Now, why should Epiphany be an occasion of great joy for us?

- Because it reveals to us our Saviour, Jesus,
 - the Saviour of both Jews and Gentiles alike.
 - How has He saved us?
 - Well, we need to look back
 - at that title the wise men use.
- They say, *“the one born King of the Jews.”*
 - And where do we find that title again?
 - On the cross, hanging over Jesus’ head:
 - “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”
- This title is used only twice in the Bible
 - Once at the beginning of our Lord’s life
 - And again several times at His death.
 - Both instances
 - it was used by people
 - who were not Jewish.
- Jesus does His saving job

- in a most unique and unusual way
 - by dying on that cross,
 - in our place,
 - to take away our sins.
- The baby born in humble circumstances
 - died in even the more humble circumstances
 - of humility and shame.

He will do this willingly

- to accomplish exactly what we need:
 - to make that one acceptable sacrifice for our sin
 - your sin and mine.
- What the Gentiles were groping around
 - in the darkness to find -----
 - how to get right with God
 - has now been revealed,
 - it has been made manifest.
- It is not in what we do to appease the gods.
 - Rather, it is in what God has done
 - to rescue us
 - out of our ignorance and idolatry.
- He sent His Son, Jesus Christ,
 - to be the Saviour of the world.

The light is shining in the darkness,

- the darkness covering the earth,
 - the thick darkness that was covering
 - most of the peoples of the earth,
 - that is, the Gentiles.
- What is revealed at Epiphany
 - is God's plan to make us Gentiles:
 - heirs of the inheritance
 - waiting for us in heaven;
 - members of Christ's body, the church;
 - and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus
 - through the gospel.

This is the special emphasis of the Epiphany festival.

- And this is why wise men and women

- from the east and the west
 - and the north and the south
 - this is why you,
 - dear friends,
 - make the journey today,
 - to find Christ your Saviour
 - here where He has promised
 - to be found.