

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian [**MIDD-ee-unn**] and Ephah [**EE-fah**], all they from Sheba [**Shee-BAH**] shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall shew [**SHOW**] forth the praises of the LORD. All the flocks of Kedar [**KEY-darr**] shall be gathered together unto thee, the rams of Nebaioth [**knee-BYE-oth**] shall minister unto thee: they shall come up with acceptance on mine altar, and I will glorify the house of my glory. Who are these that fly as a cloud, and as the doves to their windows? Surely the isles shall wait for me, and the ships of Tarshish [**TARR-shish**] first, to bring thy sons from far, their silver and their gold with them, unto the name of the LORD thy God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because he hath glorified thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.⁴

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.⁵ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

“And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea, in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Feast of the Epiphany, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, 1943).

³ Isaiah 60:1-9 (KJV). If Epiphany I falls on January 13, read Isaiah 60:10-end instead.

⁴ St. Matthew 2:1-12 (KJV).

⁵ Cf. Micah 5:2. See also St. John 7:42.

⁶ The Gospel According to St. Matthew 2:1-2 (NIV).

⁷ MASSEY HAMILTON SHEPHERD, JR., THE OXFORD AMERICAN PRAYER BOOK COMMENTARY 96 & 107 (Oxford University Press 1950).

⁸ The Gospel According to St. John 1:10-11 (NIV).

⁹ The Gospel According to St. Matthew 2:5-6 (NIV).

¹⁰ Supply Priest at Holy Angels Anglican Church, Picayune, MS, and Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA.

Homily:

He was born King of the Jews, but He came to save both Jews and Gentiles: everyone who would believe in Him.

The Epiphany, celebrated on January 6, is one of the oldest feasts of the Church, which actually predates the observance of Christmas,⁷ and which, since the institution of the Christmas Feast, has marked the end of the twelve days of the Christmas season. Indeed, the celebration of the Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas, is the origin of the expression “The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

It is not, however, simply a convenient time to end the celebrations associated with Christmas. The word *epiphany* means a manifestation or striking appearance. Christ’s birth marked the first time He had appeared as a human being in the world. By this birth, God was manifested as man in, and to, the world.

Commonly, the Epiphany is linked with the visit of the wise men or kings who came to the Christ Child to worship Him. This visitation marked the first time God had revealed Himself directly to the Gentiles. Through the Magi, Jesus revealed Himself to the non-Jewish of the world, prefiguring the eventual spread of His Church to all lands and peoples.

God came into the world, not with great ceremony and fanfare, but as an infant child born in meager circumstances. The shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem came at the urging of angels to see the child, but none of the nobles of the Jews did so. As St. John notes in his Gospel, “*He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not.*”⁸

The Pharisees did not come out to see Him, nor did the scribes. Indeed, they seemed blissfully unaware that the prophecies had been fulfilled. But some foreigners predicted

this birth, and saw the star above Bethlehem, and came to search for the long-expected Messiah. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they inquired as to where the King of the Jews might be found.

Herod the Great, ruler of the Jews in Israel by virtue of his political connections to Augustus Caesar, became alarmed when the Magi came through Jerusalem asking questions about where they might find the King of the Jews, for Herod himself, who was not of the required Davidic lineage, held that title only by relying on his Roman sponsors.

Herod first demanded of his own people where the King of the Jews might be born. They told him, *“In Bethlehem of Judea: for thus it is written by the prophet, ‘And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, art not the least among the princes of Judea: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.’”*⁹

Herod attempted to trick the Magi into telling him where the child might be found, but they were warned of his intentions in a dream, and left the area another way. In his fury over being tricked, Herod decided to try to eliminate anyone who might replace him by ordering the deaths of all male children two years old or younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem. *“He came unto his own, and his own received him not”* was somewhat of an understatement.

The Magi, however, knew better. They came to Bethlehem seeking a Messiah, and they found Him. They came with open hearts, and found the Saviour. They were led by a star to the place where the Child lay in the manger, and brought Him fine gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and worshiped Him as King of the Jews.

Herod failed to find the Christ child. Joseph, husband of Mary, Jesus’ mother, had been warned in a dream to take Mary and the child out of Judea and into Egypt to hide from Herod

because Herod sought to kill Jesus. There Joseph, Mary and Jesus stayed until Herod’s death. Then, an angel came again to Joseph in a dream and advised him to return with Mary and the child to Nazereth because Herod was dead.

As for Herod, it is said by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus that he died of a debilitating and painful disease that left him unable to breathe and in horrible pain. Herod, in his decision to kill all the male children in the area of Bethlehem under the age of two, had decided to engage on a course that he must have understood involved the attempt to overthrow God.

The Epiphany, then, is the revelation of God as man to the world. It is because Jesus Christ humbled Himself to be born as man, suffering all our human frailties, that He could expiate our sins and open to us a pathway to restore ourselves to God.

At the Epiphany our Lord revealed Himself to all of us, so that we, too, can worship Him as Lord and Saviour of all. Not just the Jews, not just some of us: we all have the opportunity to accept Him, follow Him, and be saved by Him.

Let us pray.

Eternal God, You sent Your only-begotten Son to act as redeemer of the world, for both Jew and Gentile. As we celebrate this day His manifestation in human form to the Gentiles represented by the Magi, let us remember that we now must spread the Word to all the world, showing Your Son to all peoples through ourselves and our lives. This we ask for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

—oo0oo—

The Rev’d Larry Wagoner, MSW¹⁰
January 6, 2013