

“Enlightenment”

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

Years ago, on a television sit-com, there was this conversation. A very well-educated older man was talking with a younger woman. It went something like this.

He says, “I have really enjoyed our conversations, my dear. But, now that I’ve had this epiphany, I realize that I am too old for you.”

Then she says, “Even so, I can’t thank you enough for all you have taught me. You have taught me so much, just about everything really, except what ‘epiphany’ means.”

Well, there are two meaning of the word, actually. With that TV show, epiphany means “a sudden striking understanding of something,” according to the dictionary ([Merriam Webster Dictionary](#)). Also, the word is not capitalized.

But today, we are using the capital E Epiphany. It is the celebration of the Wise Men’s visit to see the Baby Jesus.

Well, no, that’s not the best way to say that. The Wise Men didn’t just drop by, like next-door neighbors. They journeyed miles and miles, in order to worship the Baby Jesus, and pay him homage.

The Wise Men were men who studied the stars. They are called both astrologers (who looked for signs and omens) and astronomers (who watched the movements of the stars and planets). Of course, they lacked telescopes and modern equipment. They used their eyes, and they also had the reflections of the stars and the sky in special pools of water.

And here was this new star, what we call the Star of Bethlehem. It must have been very special and very bright and very new, for them to notice it and follow it on a journey from Persia to Israel.

In a way, that star was God’s invitation to the Wise Men. Or maybe it was God’s combination birth announcement and invitation. A new baby, the King of the Jews has been born! Come and see him!

We usually think of the Wise Men as very rich men, riding on camels. That makes sense—travel is expensive. Travel over long distances usually involves

riding, if at all possible. Also, the gifts which the men brought to Jesus were very expensive; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. So yes, they were rich people.

Now, while riding is easier than walking, riding on a camel is not necessarily pleasant. They are pretty cranky animals. I have ridden on one, in the Holy Land, myself. I am glad to have had the experience, but still, the camel did not seem happy to have me on its back. Fortunately, due to my nice husband, I got the first turn at riding that particular camel. By the time the last person on the tour had a turn, that camel was in a BAD mood.

All that is to say that the Wise Men, on their camels, were not taking a luxurious vacation, in perfect comfort and ease. Oh no, there were on their way to find the Baby Jesus, and they did whatever it took, however long it took.

Funny thing, as much as they were drawn to Israel, they did not know exactly where to find Jesus, what town. After all, they were not Jewish themselves. So they stopped in Jerusalem to ask.

In that decision, they were not so wise. They consulted King Herod, the ruler of the area, about the newborn King of the Jews. Herod did not know himself, so he consulted the Jewish scholars, who told them that Bethlehem was the place.

Herod pretended that he wanted to go pay homage to the Baby Jesus himself, but that was not his intention at all. No, “Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him” at this news from the Wise Men.

I have this vivid memory of that particular Bible verse being acted out in a children’s Christmas pageant. The kid playing Herod was a chubby little boy, wearing a striped bathrobe and some kind of crown. When this verse was read, “Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him,” he frowned, folded his arms, and paced back and forth a few times.

Like I said, it’s so clear in my memory. Too bad Herod was not confined to such a mild reaction. No, Herod was paranoid and violent and power-mad. Later in this Bible chapter, in anger and frustration, he ordered baby boys to be killed. As his life went on, Herod had his own sons and finally his wife killed, so as to keep his own power. Herod was evil and crazy. He never intended to go and pay the Baby Jesus homage. The last thing Herod wanted was a new king. Not at all!

But back to the Wise Men. With the information they had received, they went to Bethlehem and found the one they had been seeking, the one they had been believing in—Jesus, God’s own Son, come to this world to save it. They bowed down in worship, and gave him their wonderful extravagant gifts.

Those gifts! Think of it. Think of how Mary and Joseph must have felt. There was the arrival of “very excited men, beaming with delight, bowing low and asking to see the new king! They pointed up to the star and said it had led them to [the Holy Family, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus]. Presumably, they “were welcomed in and they dropped to their knees in front of Jesus. They came from [unheard of lands] and wore the strangest robes, decorated with patterns of vine leaves and fishes, but they were old robes that had seen better days. . . .these men knew there were more important things than clothes. They didn’t seem bothered about the fact that [the family] was poor and just about everything [they] had for the baby was borrowed. Then they brought out the gifts in the three jars.

One was gold. Gold! [The family] hardly dared accept it, but it would have offended them [otherwise]. It was the Wise Men’s way of proclaiming Jesus as a king. The second was incense, as a sign of worship and prayer. Then there was myrrh . . .Myrrh! It’s used for embalming the dead—the old—and how could they give that to [a] beautiful newborn baby?” (Women of the Bible, by Margaret McAllister.)

However, every person will die some time.

Just in case you wanted to know, the gold was from the land of Sheba. The frankincense was from Arabia. The myrrh was from Egypt. They were expensive, precious gifts, even though Mary and Joseph may not have understood the full significance.

But you know, in those three gifts and in these twelve verses in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus’ whole life was summed up and described. Born to a poor working class family, Jesus lived a simple life, never one of wealth. People in power feared and hated him, and did all they could to destroy him, at his birth and in his adulthood. Even so, the very wisest people sought him, no matter what their faith or nationality. They made every effort to find Jesus, and worship him, because he was and is God’s Son.

Just as mentioned before, the gold was fit for a king, and Jesus is King. The frankincense was part of worship; as God's Son, we worship him. The myrrh, used in tending to the dead, meant that Jesus' death was part of God's plan for our salvation.

And the star! The great and wonderful star reminds us that Jesus is the Light of the World, lighting up the darkness, bringing truth and clarity, and drawing us toward all that is good and holy.

So, a blessed and enlightening Epiphany to us all. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, January 5, 2020.