

[Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72; Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6; Matthew 2:1-12]

Thank God for those three kings! For those of us who can't bear to see the holidays end and chronically have a hard time taking down the Christmas tree each year, the Feast of the Epiphany supplies one more excuse to keep the holiday spirit going. As we know, the Magi famously bring gifts, and they also bring their homage. But perhaps the most important thing they bring, as far as our liturgical year is concerned, is one more reason to keep the party going.

It's no wonder that Epiphany feels like the last gasp of the Christmas holiday. Technically speaking, Epiphany used to *be* Christmas to half of the known Church, and the two celebrations share a common beginning. Our current feast of Christmas was celebrated as a Christian response to the pagan rituals of the winter solstice observed since the third century on December 25. As the empire worshipped the "invincible sun god" of winter's dying light, Christians adored the "invincible Son of God" who brings light to the "people who walk in darkness." But that was true only according to the calendar of the West; in the East, the solstice was celebrated on January 6. And so two "Christmases" arose in the early Church, lending us the "12 days of Christmas" we now know.

And what was commemorated on this Christian solstice, East and West, on either date? It varied from one community to another. Some honored the Incarnation of Jesus in the Nativity; others proclaimed the revelation of Jesus as God's son in his Baptism; still others celebrated the arrival of the Magi.

They acknowledged Jesus as literally the "King of Kings"; while some preferred to recall the miracle of the water-made-wine at the wedding feast at Cana through which Jesus revealed the first sign of his divinity. It wasn't until the fourth century that December 25, regularized as the Feast of the Nativity in the West, was also adopted in the East. At that time, the East claimed January 6 as the Feast of the Epiphany, most frequently celebrating what we now call the Baptism of the Lord on that date. By the fifth century, the West claimed January 6 for Epiphany as well, preferring to honor the arrival of the Magi on that day.

Yet Armenian rite churches today still celebrate Christ's Nativity on January 6. The scrambled roots of this feast are hardly untied. But why should we untie them? Are you totally confused yet?

Why not acknowledge what the early Church perceived: that all of these events speak of one and the same revelation? These four feasts -- Nativity, the coming of the Magi, the Baptism of the Lord (which we celebrate next Sunday), and the miracle at Cana (which we celebrate the week after that) -- are *all Epiphanies*; that is, they all manifest the eternal and ongoing presence of God in our midst. God chooses to be known to us as the Word-made-flesh of Jesus born in Bethlehem. The divine is revealed before the nations symbolically in the visitation of foreign wise men bearing gifts. A voice from heaven claims Jesus as the divine Son at his Baptism. And the power of heaven is manifested by Jesus in the water-made-wine of his first miracle. All four events speak of the same extraordinary truth!

If we learn nothing else from the Church's early scramble to define one precise experience as "epiphany," it's that there are lots to choose from. God is always lifting the veil between heaven and earth and affording us a look-see! We have this hour of celebrating the Mass in Word and Sacrament; the rare but palpable experience of being "met" in our prayer; the very real miracles of healing and forgiveness and compassion; you can probably add more. The wise men brought three gifts, but Epiphany brings multitudes. God *wants* to be known to us. Look! Listen! And celebrate.

Jesus came to save all people. The Magi found him. They represent the revelation of Jesus to all peoples everywhere for all generations to come. So like those wise kings who followed the star until they could kneel and do homage to a greater King, we, too, need to travel our lives' journey wisely to find Jesus' presence. Every day we should be moving closer to finding how Jesus continues to reveal himself to us in our lives. And like the Magi, we need to share that presence with others as we continue our life's journey.

The Greek word "magi" meant scientists from the east, despite translated as "astrologers." Because they could study and predict the movement of

heavenly bodies, they were thought to be magicians, where the word "magic" comes from. Matthew included the magi in his Gospel account to show that Jesus was born to bring salvation to all: Gentiles as well as Jews.

The Church celebrates Epiphany to tell the world that no one who humbles himself before Jesus, paying homage to His divine-and-human presence, is excluded from the kingdom of God. Christ is the way, the truth and the life. No one can have eternal life without Him, but all are welcome.

Contrary to popular legends, the magi were not kings, even though post-biblical writings often referred to them as kings because of the royal gifts they brought. It's not their kingship that the gifts represent; it's the Messianic kingship of Jesus. The magi prophetically testified with these gifts that Jesus was a divine king who would die. Gold honored Jesus as king, incense honored His divinity, and myrrh, which was used in preparing the dead for burial, honored His death. Eventually, the gifts also came to symbolize our Christian response: gold for our righteousness, incense our prayers, and myrrh our sufferings for Christ.

The word "epiphany" means a moment of discovery, a revelation that changes our lives. Did the magi recognize the baby Jesus as the world's savior? It was a common belief at the time that all kings were divine -- they were gods living among us until they died. Did the magi have an epiphany about the permanent kingship of Jesus?

Surely after this pilgrimage they never forgot about Him and they kept their ears open for news from Jerusalem about Him. Surely they learned about the King of the Jews who was crucified. We know this, because at some point, they became very saintly Christians; their relics still exist and have been venerated since very early times. Without a doubt, the magi worshiped Jesus, even if they didn't fully understand why until later. Have you had an epiphany during a time of suffering? How did it increase your righteousness? How did it affect your prayer life? These are your royal gifts for Jesus! AMEN!

[Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Cor. 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21]

Life is complicated. Most of us don't live our years in a perfectly straight line without a few twists and turns. And sometimes we choose outright departures from the original direction we were headed. Opportunities arise that we had never even considered, and we take the risk to follow them.

Or, circumstances quite out of our control throw us curveballs we weren't expecting. Lucky breaks (a promotion that involves moving to a new city) and misfortune (injury, illness, and loss) each have a way of changing the plan we had for our lives until sometimes we can no longer remember what the plan was supposed to be. In high school, I was counseled to become a bookkeeper or a librarian. Isn't THAT exciting?! I'm glad I followed God's plan for me instead!

At times, we may look back at who we were and not recognize that person anymore. Or we may stare into the mirror today and wonder who the heck *that* could possibly be! As the road takes detours we hadn't anticipated, our very identity may be called into question. Maybe you were planning on a career in finance and wound up in social work. Or in your younger days, you may have been a hippie, and now you own gobs of real estate. Perhaps you never thought you'd have so many children, or you were counting on the idea that your marriage would last a lifetime. Sometimes we have dreams we can't reach; and at other times, life blossoms into something beyond our wildest expectations.

But what do you do when you're lost and want to find your way back to the person you were or want to be? That goal, like any goal we set for ourselves, begins with a decision to act. We can't change the past. We can't seize the future. The only moment we hold in our hands is now. And it's the most powerful moment in our lives.

The dilemma of getting back on track is timeless. Imagine the scene we heard about in the First Reading. The nation of Israel has been exiled in a foreign land for so long that they barely remember the covenant of Moses anymore. When they are finally free to return to their homeland -- or at least, their children and grandchildren are -- they set about rebuilding their ruined cities.

Along with the exterior reconstruction, of course, there must be an interior recapturing of their identity as a people. Ezra the priest knows this and brings forward the Law of Moses to read before the nation. Who they are, and who they are not, is contained in the words of this scroll.

And the nation has stood in this situation before many times throughout its history, when Moses, Joshua, and later kings and religious leaders would stand before the nation and order the Law of Moses to be read aloud. At every critical juncture, the people have needed to be reminded of the promises they had made and the Lord whom they serve. They need to choose again to serve the Lord, or some other. Sometimes they have heard the words of the Lord with delight and at other times with dread in their hearts.

In the presence of Ezra that day, the people literally “lay down and cry.” They hear the direction they’ve been called to go, and they know darn well how far they’ve strayed. It seems overwhelming, impossible really, that they could ever make it back to the people they are eternally called to be. Their weeping betrays their despair, their repentance and their hope.

Ezra reminds the people that the Word of the Lord is supposed to be *good* news. He tells them to celebrate this day as a new opportunity, and not mourn it as if it were a death sentence. Ezra calls the moment of decision *holy*, because in it is the full measure of the power of God. God will be their strength. God is Lord of the impossible. The people don’t have to conform to their true identity all at once. All they need to do is take the first step and grab onto the Word of Life.

When Jesus presents the scripture to the people of his day, He is offering them an even better opportunity. *In this hour*, Jesus says; meaning that the Word becomes flesh right before our eyes! This is the same hour in which we stand right now. Today’s the day, now is the acceptable time, we have nothing else to wait for and not a moment to lose. People of faith can never stop at impossible. The power of decision is in our hands, and the strength of our God is invested in us. Now is the acceptable time; there is no better moment to act!

In the Gospel passage describing Jesus’ return to Galilee, Jesus is in a take charge, electric mood. Imagine sitting in church and an altar server walks up

to this ambo, reads from Scripture about the coming of the Messiah, and then proclaims to the congregation that “this Scripture is fulfilled this very day in me.”

Wow! Yet for most of us we’d actually be thinking: how misguided. In fact we’d probably boot the kid right out of church, and if they continued to blaspheme and claim authority that only God can rightfully claim, we’d probably have them locked away for life, which would be only a slightly better fate than Jesus actually received at the hands of His contemporaries. Don’t worry altar servers -- I would just send you back to your pew!

Today act as if you truly believe this Gospel -- that God is here among us loving us unconditionally. It’s impossible not to want to do great things out of sheer gratitude that God chose to be with us.

Back in 1985, St. Martin de Porres Parish had the distinction of being the first parish in the Archdiocese of Detroit to bring the Stephen Ministry into our parish. It is a ministry of support and encouragement for our parishioners during times of difficulty and loneliness. They will join us next week at the 11 AM Mass to renew their commission, and to ask us to re-commit ourselves to supporting them.

My friends, take time to spread the Good News today: Assure a grieving friend that they will be comforted; remind a loved one in pain that their suffering will be redeemed; muster the courage to ask someone you hurt for forgiveness. Like Jesus, speak and act with confidence that God’s promises to us will be fulfilled and that the best version of yourself is who you were meant to be.

AMEN!