

A Sermon for Epiphany, Given on January 11, 2009

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Over the course of history many remarkable things have happened about which we know nothing. Occasionally, while channel surfing, I come across the history or science channel and hear some unique fact about the world or some strange event in history. Fascinating stuff and I hear about it only because I chance upon a TV station at a moment in time.

Christmas is a fact of history. God became man. It happened in an ordinary stable in the small town of Bethlehem. It has all the characteristics of stories that are typically obscure and known only to a few. You know—an archeologist doing work in Israel unearths a two thousand year old artifact indicating that some people thought a baby born in the area was the Son of God.

But, of course, Christmas is not a hidden piece of history. It is known around the world. Despite attempts to change the letters A.D. to C.E., the birth of Christ remains the event around which our history is ordered. We just began A.D., Anno Domini, “in the year of our Lord,” 2009.

Jesus is not known only by archeologists and historians because God revealed Jesus to people. God’s revelation, his making Jesus known, is the theme of Epiphany. On Christmas night, an angel appeared to certain shepherds and announced to them the birth of Christ. When the baby Jesus was first brought to the temple, he was revealed to Simeon and Anna, the prophetess (Luke 2:25-38). In our gospel today (Matthew 2:1f.), Jesus was revealed to the Wise Men, or Magi, by the star.

Now, the revelation of Christ to the Magi was a new twist on God’s Old Testament revelation. The Wise Men were Gentiles. The Jewish people were called to be a holy nation, which meant that they were to be separate from the Gentiles. That Christ was revealed to these Gentiles indicated that Jesus was born not only for Israel but also for the nations. As Simeon said in *Nunc Dimittis*, Jesus would be “A light to lighten the Gentiles.”

This was not as earthshaking as it might seem. The Old Testament has multiple prophecies about God’s promise to include all the nations in his people. In Isaiah, God said, “The Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (60:3); and again, “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (49:6). Gentile mothers named Ruth and Rahab are part of the lineage of Jesus.

Gentiles could always become Jews, even in the Old Testament; but for males, the process of conversion required that they be circumcised. And, by the time of Christ, conversion required they also keep all the Jewish ceremonial and dietary laws. The earthshaking part of the New Testament was the revelation that, to become part of God’s people, circumcision and a kosher diet were no longer required.

This new twist in God’s plan was revealed in chapter 10 of Acts, which describes an encounter between Peter and Cornelius, a Gentile soldier. During his noonday prayers, Peter was given a vision by God that told him to eat non-kosher food and go to the home of Cornelius—things a devout Jew would never otherwise do.

In obedience to the vision, Peter went and preached to Cornelius and his household about Jesus. As Peter spoke to them, the Holy Spirit came down upon these Gentiles and they spoke in tongues, just as happened to the first Jewish believers on Pentecost in Acts 2.

Peter, seeing this, realized what God was saying. If God gave the Holy Spirit to people who were not circumcised, then circumcision must no longer be necessary. This was a watershed event. From then on, the Gentiles were admitted into the church on the basis of their faith, without circumcision.

It must be emphasized that Christianity is not a separate religion for the Gentiles, but is, rather, the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God. Christ came for both Jew and Gentile to make one people out of the two. All who put their faith in Jesus, no matter what race they are or country they are from, become part of God's people and inheritors of God's promises.

God continues to reveal himself to "all sorts and conditions of men." The church is the extension of Christ's Incarnation and the bearer of the revelation. As Jesus said, "Go...make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The church reveals Christ through the preaching of the gospel. The church reveals Christ through the spiritual gifts and service of her members. When you love in action because you belong to Christ, Christ is revealed through you.

God's revelation is selective and mysterious. Jesus is revealed to some and not others—and it is not exactly clear why. God revealed Jesus to certain shepherds—to those shepherds but not to every shepherd. God revealed Jesus to Simeon and Anna in the temple, but not to the priests. God revealed Jesus to the Magi, but not to Herod.

This is the mystery of divine election or choice. We are part of God's chosen people, and it is not exactly clear why we've been chosen. The gospel is proclaimed to all. Why have we been given eyes to see that Jesus is the Son of God, while others do not believe?

The star was there for all to see, but only the Magi came. Jesus preached to all Israel, but only a small band of disciples actually came to faith. The gospel is preached to all. Some hear and believe, and some hear and think it is just stupid. As St. Paul said, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18).

God's marketing campaign is very strange in that way. He could appear with power in the public square and compel people to believe by giving visible proof. Instead, he operates sacramentally, giving outward signs of his inward graces. This is why all evangelism must include prayer for the curing of spiritual blindness. Christ is not very far from anyone, but people need eyes of faith in order to see.

The Wise Men came by the leading of a star. Why are you here? Epiphany is a season of time to the think about the ways that God has revealed Jesus to us, and give thanks that *we*, like the Wise Men, have become part of God's chosen people.

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