

A Sermon for The Epiphany, Given on January 8, 2006

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There are subtleties to the Epiphany gospel that highlight the meaning of Epiphany. The wise men came from afar to ask, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" (the gospel, Matthew 2:1ff.). When they arrived, they discovered that no one knew where the king was.

The chief priests and scribes knew, based on a passage in Micah, that the promised messiah/king was supposed to be born in Bethlehem. But they didn't know that he had been born. Thus, foreigners from the east brought news to the leaders of Israel that their king had been born.

The question "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" was particularly vexing for King Herod. Herod held the title "king of the Jews" but he was not born with it. Herod had become king of the Jews through political manipulation and bribes. Herod could never be anything more than a pretender to the throne and he was rightfully insecure about his status. Thus, when the magi came with gifts for the legitimate, God-ordained king, it was a sign from God, like the handwriting on the wall in Daniel, that the days of Herod's kingdom were numbered.

The words of the Magnificat come to mind: "He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek." King Herod, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, the rich and powerful are put down. A poor maiden from Nazareth, her pious husband, a few devout fishermen, a converted tax collector and such, are exalted.

These subtleties of the story highlight two aspects of the revelation of God in Christ: it is selective and it is revolutionary. The revelation is given to some and not to others. And the revelation signals the beginning of profound change.

Epiphany is an opportunity to reflect on the doctrine of election: God's choice of people. Why did God reveal his Son to foreigners while so many in Israel were kept ignorant? Why was he born of the Virgin Mary and not of some other virgin? Why did angels appear to *certain* shepherds as they watched their flocks by night? Of all the Pharisees, why did Jesus choose one Saul of Tarsus?

Why did God choose Abraham among the great men of the ancient near east? Why did God choose to appear to Moses in the burning bush? Why did God choose David to be the great ancestor of the Incarnation? And why did God choose each of us? Why have we been led to faith in the Son of God while so many others we know do not believe?

And why does God work so quietly? God could certainly send legions of angels to the rulers of the world—indeed to every person—and compel them to believe. I have had many people say to me, "If only God would appear to me personally, I would believe." But God does not typically do that. Rather, he sends other people to tell us about Jesus. He reveals himself through his sovereign ordering of events in our lives, through signs and stars, through word and sacrament; things perceived only by those who have eyes to see.

The mystery of revelation is captured by a verse in Matthew 11:25-27. Jesus prayed, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding

and revealed them to babes... All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

God’s revelation is also revolutionary. God reveals himself in order to cause change. When the baby Jesus was brought to the temple, Simeon said, “the Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign which will be spoken against” (Luke 2:34). The revelation that came by angels to certain shepherds and by a star to the magi lead to the destruction of the temple and the end of the current regime in Israel. His birth signals, ultimately, the end of all earthly kingdoms.

God reveals his Son to us in order to change us. Many people seek religion for mere comfort. Many think of faith as a mere insurance policy that guarantees a place in heaven. But God reveals his Son to us in order to turn our lives upside down. The revolution that Christ works in the world begins in each heart.

Consider what happened to those chosen in the Bible. Abraham was called to leave his country and his family and go to a new land. Moses was called to leave his wife and children and return to Egypt to battle Pharaoh. David was called to suffer persecution at the hand of Saul, the king he was destined to replace. The apostles were called to martyrdom and exile. Jesus showed Paul, “How many things he must suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:16 NKJV).

This is a key point in our culture where Christianity is seen as a consumer product and is, consequently, evaluated in terms of how it makes us feel. Genuine faith will at times make us feel very bad before it makes us feel good. The light of revelation will expose our secret sins and lead us to confession because it means to overthrow the kingdom of evil within us. The light of revelation will challenge our attachment to earthly things, calling us to sacrifice the temporal for the eternal. The star may lead us into new and challenging paths and away from the comfort of the status quo.

Perhaps the definitive characteristic of the chosen is the willingness to accept the implications of the Gospel. For, in fact, those who are not numbered among the chosen are given the revelation also. But they reject it and its implications. Herod was given the revelation by the wise men. He could have accepted it and yielded his crown to the true king. Instead, he rejected the revelation because he was unwilling to change in accordance with the will of God. Thus, the magi worshiped the king, but Herod tried to kill him.

Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God in Christ. He who was born at Christmas is now revealed to wise men and to each of us. As we respond to the revelation with faith and obedience, we confirm our place among the chosen of God.