

Date Preached	02-Jan-2022	Date Initiated	22-Dec-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Xmas 2, All Yrs

" O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored  
the dignity of *human* nature "



It is a familiar, if not often told, story: Three<sup>1</sup> wise men—not necessarily kings; but learned men, perhaps priests or astrologers—travel from the East (probably Persia—more or less, modern Iran) in search of a newborn king. They follow the movement of a star until it stops over the place where Jesus is, and when they enter the house and see Him in Mary's arms, they fall on their knees in reverence and offer Him magnificent gifts suited for a true king.

Our attention is sometimes stolen from the essence of this account by the horrific and murderous terror an already-insecure Herod unleashes when he's made even less-secure by mysterious reports of a 'rival' King's birth in Bethlehem.<sup>2</sup> But this day, let us keep our focus squarely on these travelers from the East, for in them we have, in some ways, the true ending of the Christmas story; the *ultimate* Advent, if you will, of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Luke's telling of Jesus' birth that we've been following since late Advent is personal and intimate: the Angel Gabriel's appearance and announcement to the Virgin Mary, alone ... her quiet celebration with her cousin Elizabeth ... the birth of the Holy Child in a stable, attended by a few domestic animals ... the quiet adoration of a small band the shepherds, led to Him from their fields by angels. Luke has given us front row seats to all the drama, beauty and grace that comprise God's decision to enter this world and take up right alongside us.

But if the news of Jesus' birth—of God's manifesting Godself among us—had remained solely the province of heavenly angels and humble shepherds, you and I would probably not be sitting here right now. The Good News would have remained unknown to the world. The miracle of Christ's birth would still have happened, of course, but it might have remained a blip rather than a bombshell. The story of Christmas cannot end with a few ragtag shepherds' gasping astonishment and Mary's inward musings if the Nativity really *is* the dawn of a divine New Age for the world ... if God not only determined to bind Godself to humanity but also to *reveal* to humanity its newly-given inseparability from God.

Christmas' completion—the ending of Christ's beginning, if you will—therefore, lies *here*, in the Epiphany: literally, the *appearance* or *manifestation* of something or someone, and especially a royal or divine 'someone.' Into a story whose earthly elements—cold, dusty roads; too-crowded inns; poor men and women beset by the demands of a foreign occupier—would have been familiar

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<sup>1</sup> I will follow the convention—harmless enough—that there were *three* of these visitors. Matthew's text does not enumerate them; this tradition arose from the fact that they brought three gifts (*see* Mt 2:11).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Church celebrates the victims of Herod's mania—all of the infants he slaughtered in a futile attempt to overpower the will of God—on the Feast of the Holy Innocents (28 December).

to anyone living in Israel at the time, wander<sup>3</sup> three men who may be the most *outré*—the most 'other'—characters in all the Gospels: they're not Jewish or even Greek; they're not from Israel or even the Mediterranean; they're not carpenters or fishermen or even tax collectors. They have *nothing* in common with any of the people or places that will fill Jesus' earthly life, and yet it is to *them* that God reveals Christ's birth. God's very first act<sup>4</sup> after manifesting Godself in Bethlehem is to notify an exotic, foreign, literally other-worldly band of star-gazers who know so little about Israel that they stop in Jerusalem to get directions to Bethlehem!<sup>5</sup>

The message is clear: The 'us' Jesus has come to is *all* of us: not just to the Christian 'us' ... or the Judeo-Christian 'us' ... or the western or Greco-Roman 'us' ... but to the 'us' of God's people—all the people whom God created; which is to say, the entire human race. Yes, the Gospels are the story of God, as Jesus, accomplishing God's divine purposes in a particular place and time; and in community with a particular group of people. But first the arrival, and then the obeisance, of these complete outsiders at Jesus' crib side tell us that God's plan is too big ... God's promise is too good ... God's desire is too deep ... to be the privilege of any one sect of humanity. In the Epiphany, God telegraphs the universal reach of Jesus' saving mission.

Scholars bicker and contend endlessly about what they call Christian "exclusivism" and "inclusivism": about whether personal profession of faith in Jesus Christ is the sole means of obtaining divine salvation; and if so, about when and how such a profession may be validly made. Opinions run the full gamut ... from the most rigidly closed to the most pliantly open ... and I have my own, of course.<sup>6</sup> The import of the Epiphany, however, lies not in *resolving* this debate, but rather in *engendering* it: The lesson of the three wise men traversing hundreds of miles and crossing enormous cultural boundaries to reverence the Baby Jesus is the magnanimity of God's love, tied not to any one place or any one people; is the immensity of God's covenant, promised to a line of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky or grains of sand on the seashore. Before Jesus utters a word or even takes a step, God declares that God has come for all. The offer of grace is as infinite as the One Who makes it.

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The Feast of the Epiphany, which we will celebrate this Thursday and which we receive a foretaste of in today's Gospel lesson, marks the end of Christmastide. In our lessons next Sunday, we will return to the life and words and deeds of Jesus among faithful Jews in ancient Palestine. But before we leave Christmas, let us pause a moment and close it out as God does. Let us claim the birth of the Christ with joy ... but without proud privilege or sharp exclusivity. Let us celebrate the Godhead's coming into this world as a divine miracle ... in whose divinity resides the capacity to

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<sup>3</sup> For homiletical convenience, I am, I acknowledge, conflating Luke's Nativity narrative and Matthew's account of the wise men.

<sup>4</sup> *I.e.*, told in Scripture.

<sup>5</sup> A trip of about all of five miles, in fact!

<sup>6</sup> I find myself, yet again, teetering on the edge of a discussion of inclusivism; and, yet again, feeling that this particular sermon is not the place to delve into it. Suffice it to say, for now, that, as a Christian, I believe (and must believe) that Jesus *is* the only pathway to God's promise of eternal salvation—to the wonderful realization of the design for which God created us—but I do not believe that explicit profession of faith in Jesus before the moment of human death is the *only* way God 'credits' or recognizes. I believe God also offers non-believers opportunities to do so after death. I am also open to the idea that, in God's unbounded generosity, God makes other manifestations of the Christ available to this world, as well: God knows them as Jesus although we (*i.e.*, the Church) may (do) not.

enfold the entire world. Let us hold the Holy Child in our arms in love—warmly and tenderly ... but turned not toward ourselves, but toward others, for *all* the world to see and know and love.

The very first thing God did after Jesus' birth was tell the Good News to the most 'other' people God knew. How, let us ask this Christmastide, are we called to do likewise?



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