

**Epiphany I**  
**St. Stephen's, Athens**  
**January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018**

My text this morning is taken from the 45<sup>th</sup> verse of the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke:

*And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him...*

Today is the First Sunday of the Epiphany season, a time when we celebrate the “Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles” as the Prayer Book terms it. The feast itself dates back to the middle of the second century, though it was not universally recognized until the time of Constantine and the triumph of the Church. The name for both feast and season is derived from ἐπιφάνεια, a Greek word used to describe the sudden appearance of something or someone upon the scene (as in a play), or of the dawning of light upon darkness. Theologically speaking, this is a useful way to think of it—*and the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.*

The feast itself occurred yesterday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, which was the Twelfth Day of Christmas. The Gospel for that day is the story of the Wise Men, and their journey from Jerusalem on to Bethlehem. Today's gospel tells a different story, a rather odd one, perhaps, for those accustomed to associating the idea of “the Epiphany” with visitors bringing gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the two episodes do share, I think, a common theme. I was reminded of this in thinking of my own encounter with The Wise Men and a resolution I made as a result of it. It came about on a trip I took Italy one summer in grad school, and if you'll indulge me for a moment in a reminiscence, with a bit of history thrown in, I think you'll see what I mean.

When Americans go to Italy they most often head to Rome or Tuscany, and while these are well worth visiting, one of the country's best kept secrets is the Adriatic coast. There you'll find a greener, wilder landscape than that of Tuscany and less crowded ruins than those in Rome. You can also visit what was one of the most important places in Europe during the Early Middle Ages—the city of Ravenna. From 402 to 751 Ravenna was capital of the Western Roman Empire, capital of the Ostrogothic Kingdom, and the provincial seat of the Byzantine exarch, or governor, in the Italian peninsula, and three hundred years of royal or imperial patronage made Ravenna one of the richest sees in the post-Roman West. Even after being plundered by Charlemagne to decorate his palace at Aachen, it still has some of the best examples of early Christian art and architecture in the world.

The crown jewel of it all is the Basilica of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, which was enlarged and adorned by the Byzantine Emperor, Justinian, who commissioned a series of fabulous mosaics which run up and down the length of the nave. Each one is comprised of thousands of glass *tesserae*, and the overall effect of these little colored light-catchers is one of astonishing beauty. One of the largest mosaics depicts the Three Wise Men, taking

their gifts to lay before the Madonna and Child. If you study their clothes, you'll see that they're dressed differently from everyone else. Rather than tunics and chasubles, which was the common dress in the late-Roman West, they've got on pants and capes and floppy little caps, all of which would have signaled to Byzantine viewers that these men were Persians.

For a student of church history, this is highly interesting because Matthew, who is the only Evangelist to record the episode, never says where Our Lord's visitors came from. He merely describes them as "wise men from the east." In fact, he doesn't even tell us how many "wise men" there are—three just comes from the number of gifts. In some Eastern traditions (notably the Syriac) the number is actually twelve, but in the Ravenna mosaic there are only three and they're clearly imagined as Magi, or members of the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which was the predominant religion of Iran up until the 7<sup>th</sup> century. I find this fascinating because we see in this mosaic the development of tradition surrounding the Epiphany and how it's set very early on, in this case around the year 550.

This is not to say, however, that the tradition has no basis. In fact, it is likely based on other sources and is consistent with what we know about Persian religion. The Magi were keen observers of the stars, so the fact that the artist chose to identify them with Persian astronomer/priests makes a great deal of sense. In this regard it has more of an historical basis than the later tradition which made the wise men into kings. This royal attribution is more theological in nature, having its roots in a messianic prophecy of Isaiah, who says, *and the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising*, and the Psalms, which read *all kings shall fall down before him; [and] all nations shall do him service*.

At any rate, to get back to the mosaic, I was so impressed by it that I bought a pretty expensive poster in the gift shop, and thinking it would make a perfect addition to my office someday, went to no small trouble to get it safely home. I found a shop where I could buy a poster tube, and then spent then spent the better part of four weeks lugging that thing around with me, guarding it in train stations, tucking it under my bed at hostels, and keeping my eye on it wherever I went. Yet despite seeing it safely across most of Europe, I somehow managed to leave it sitting beside a baggage claim carousel at Hartsfield airport and never saw it again. As you might imagine, I was pretty upset over this lapse, and I only really got over it when I promised myself that I would someday go back and revisit that church, and buy another poster to hang in my office, wherever that may be.

Besides, there are worse things one can lose on a journey than a poster, as we are reminded in our lesson today. I can only imagine the sense of apprehension and loss that Mary and Joseph must have felt in finding that their twelve-year old boy had gone missing in Jerusalem and that they were already a day's journey away on the route back home. One might even be a little surprised at the mildness of their reaction when they found him, at least as it's recounted by Luke, who simply tells us that "they were amazed." As

a parent I can think of a number of things I might be feeling at a moment like that, and I'm pretty sure amazement would be pretty far down the list. But Luke's purpose here is not to convey a sense of psychological realism. Instead, what we're meant to focus on is the symbolism that stands behind the events he records. When we look at the basic pattern of the story, we begin see the resonance that I mentioned earlier between our Gospel today and the account of the Epiphany.

In yesterday's lesson, the Wise Men go to Jerusalem, they ask lots of questions, and journey for days before they find the Child they're looking for. In today's lesson Mary and Joseph go to Jerusalem, they ask lots of questions, and journey for days before they find the Child they're looking for. In short, both stories share the theme of actively seeking Jesus, and it's not until Jesus is found that the key event occurs. With the Wise Men, we're told that they fell down and worshipped him. With Mary and Joseph, we hear Jesus say, *wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business* in the midst of the Temple court. In both cases the result is the same. There is an epiphany in that the child who is sought is revealed to be the Son of God. This is one of those examples of how the Gospel writers convey the same message with a different story. Luke uses this episode to achieve the same thing that Matthew does with the story of the Magi, namely to foreshadow for his readers essential information about who this child will be.

They also serve to remind us of the part we must play in the working out of our salvation. That is, we must follow the example of my text for today and seek Jesus out. Now, this is not to say that he doesn't do the same for us. He is the Good Shepherd and will always be looking for the one sheep that is lost. Nor is it to put one's self at the center of the process. Grace flows from God and draws us ever to him. But it is essential that we play the part that God has given us, and if the pattern of the Gospels tell us anything about what we should do to heal the brokenness of our condition, it starts with seeking Jesus. What do those who are sick (like the lepers at Capernaum), mired in sin (like Matthew), troubled-in-spirit (like Nicodemus), or anxious for mercy (like Jairus) all have in common? They go and find Jesus. As Our Lord says elsewhere in the Gospels, *ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find.*

Sometimes we forget to do this, especially after the busyness of the Christmas season. We've been focusing on the coming of Christ, but once he's here, there can be a spiritual lull. I know that after Christmas, I sometimes get caught up in a desire to return to my usual routines, and in so doing, lose sight of what we've been focusing on for so many weeks—not unlike a poster in the Hartsfield airport baggage claim. That is why at the beginning of the Epiphany season, when the world is trying to keep its New Year's resolutions, the Church encourages us to keep a few of its own. They are to seek Jesus; to come to know him through worship and prayer; and to give him the proper place at the center of our lives. My prayer today is that we be given grace to persevere in our journey to find the Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.