

Fr. John's Homily for Epiphany, January 8, 2023

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Just out of curiosity, I asked Siri for a definition of *Epiphany*, and I was pleasantly surprised when she gave the original definition as the first one on a list. It was the one about the Magi visiting the young toddler king in Bethlehem. I say a surprise because so many Christian terms, ideas and images seem to get hijacked by the culture and used for other, more dubious purposes. Nevertheless, I think we can utilize the secular definition for our purposes today. We'll come back to it a little bit later. But as for Siri's first definition, it is "*The Christian celebration of the manifestation of the Christ child to the world through the Magi.*" And there are several dimensions to this story.

First off, who were the Magi? And what about the star, what was it, really? And then, of course, we have the story of the innocent little boys of Bethlehem who were put to death by a jealous and paranoid ruler. King Herod.

OK, let's address the question of the Magi. Now despite what you heard, despite what the song says, they weren't kings – they were wise men. They were scholars, they spent their time observing, studying, reflecting, and perhaps coming to conclusions about the truth of the matter. Whatever it might be. And we say that there were three only because there were the three gifts.

The tradition seems to be that they came from several locations in the east and then somehow, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit(?), they were brought together. They then went to Jerusalem where they were directed to that insignificant little town mentioned in the Scriptures by the prophet Micah, "*And to You, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ... he shall be peace.*"

So, they found the child in a house, in the city of David where they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This might have been close to two years after the birth of the little king. Tradition has given names to those three three men. *Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar*. Many Catholics use blessed chalk to write their names above the front door of their houses at the beginning of every new year. There is one at the top of my rectory front door with a date 2005. I'm a little out of date. I resolve to change that sometime soon.

I once heard a theory that the magi could have been in a school or a line of scholars that went back to Babylon and several young men who had been kidnapped from Jerusalem in the famous Babylonian exile. King Nebuchadnezzar identified the best and the brightest in Israel and took them into captivity and some of them proved their superior wisdom in his court as his advisers. Among them was Daniel and his friends, Hanania, Azariah, and Mishael, better known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednago. Were these men among the first of a long line of magi, three of whom would one day follow a star to Bethlehem?

And were they astronomers? Well, if so, then we should talk about that star. What was it? Was it literally a miraculous star that moved around and stopped over the house in

Bethlehem? That's another question that has been studied by scholars for eons, but now we have modern technology. The experts now piece together the parts of the puzzle, examining scripture, and other ancient manuscripts, study local histories, and try to find rational explanations based on the very limited description in the Gospel of Matthew. But using a cell phone, equipped with software based on the old mathematics of Johannes Kepler, the experts, in fact, any one of us, can now figure out where stars and planets were, at any point in history, from any place on earth.

So, what was that thing in the sky over Palestine, on, or near December 25, 2000 years ago, plus or minus a few days, months, or years? The current popular theory is that "the star" may have actually been a conjunction of several planets, maybe even with a star in the background, that made for a very bright object in the sky. Maybe the brightest ever. Who knows? And as for the movement of that star, settling over Bethlehem, they even have a rational explanation for that. But it would help if you were an astronomer. Some of you remember several years ago we had a gentleman named Rick Larson who was an amateur astronomer who put together a video called *The Bethlehem Star* where he describes this theory.

Now let's go back to that secular definition of *Epiphany*. We hear it all the time – it is kind of an "*aha moment*", a *sudden revelation*, or a *special insight*. As in, for instance, "*Ah, I just had an epiphany*". I think the classic example of this kind of an epiphany is the one of St. Paul. Later this month, on the 25th we will celebrate his conversion. He was blinded, knocked to the ground, and heard a mysterious voice asking him a question, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*" Paul would spend the rest of his days telling the story of how he had an epiphany that day, on the road to Damascus. The one that changed his life forever. And frankly, it changed ours too.

We need more epiphanies. If Paul the Apostle could have one, why can't we have some, right now, in this, our day and age? And, seeing that this is the time of year where we make resolutions, let us first resolve to pray for more epiphanies. For ourselves, if need be, but how about our friends and neighbors, and how about our children? Kind of sounds like the "*Warning*" we've been talking a lot about lately – an *Illumination of Conscience* that will be a universal epiphany for people all around the world.

So yes, may the scales soon drop from everybody's eyes, may we *all* come to see clearly, and may we enjoy an "*aha moment*", along with revelations and spiritual insights to help us recognize how we stand in the eyes of God.

~Fr. John