

## Seeking the Light

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Sheridan, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.  
The Feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 2013. (Text: Matthew 2:1-12)

You know, regional accents are delicious, but network television is wiping them out fast—Massachusetts, Deep South, Appalachia... they're disappearing. When I tell people I was born and raised in East Texas, they say, "You sure don't *sound* like somebody from Texas." I just say, "You should have heard my mama!"

I told this little story to a few of you last Sunday, but I'm going to tell it again because I have a bigger audience. It's about a businessman from "Up North" (as we southerners used to say) who was traveling through Texas about Christmas time. He went through a little town where he stopped to look at a "Living Nativity Scene" outside a church. You know what I mean: a stage-set "stable" where church members are dressed up like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and angels, and there's a real, live baby Jesus. There are Three Kings, too, along with a cow and donkey and some sheep. The Yankee visitor was surprised to see that the Three Kings in this Texas Nativity Scene were all wearing firefighters' helmets. He stopped nearby to get gas, and as he was paying he commented to the clerk about the interesting Live Nativity Scene down the road. He said, "It was really very nice, but something seemed odd. —Why were the Three Kings all wearing firemen's hats?"

The sales clerk answered, "Oh, it's from the song. You know, '*We Three Kings of Orient Are*'? It says 'bearing gifts we come from a 'far.'"

That's pretty bad isn't it? —Well, there's not a lot of Epiphany humor out there.

Today is "the Twelfth Day of Christmas," one of the great festivals of the Christian year, but since most people don't go to church on Epiphany – except in years like this, when it falls on a Sunday – Epiphany doesn't get much attention.

*Magi*—the so-called Wise Men from the East—are the principal actors in Matthew's story. The *magi* were Persian Zoroastrian priests and astrologers, NOT kings. It's from their name that we get the word "magic." (The "three kings" business was a medieval legend.) There may have been three, or maybe seven, or some other number of *magi*. Matthew just says they brought three *gifts* to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—but doesn't tell us how many star-watching Persian priests arrived. We learn that the Wise Men, as they worked in their observatories, had seen a new star appear in the sky. We'd call it a "nova," and they took it to be a sign from God that a new king had been born in Judea. So they left their homeland to follow the star west to Jerusalem, to the palace of King Herod the Great.

From Herod, they went—still led by the heavenly light—down to Bethlehem, where they found the king they were seeking and worshiped him, presenting their precious gifts. When it came time to return home, an angel warned them not to go back to Herod, as he had requested, but instead to go back home "by another road."

There's a lot to think about in the Epiphany story, but I want us to reflect on just four ideas this morning. FIRST: the Wise Men were seekers. They were teachable. Even though they were people to whom others looked for guidance, they recognized that there were still many things they didn't know. When the new star appeared in the sky many people saw it, but only a few allowed it to lead them. The *magi*

had the courage to follow a new star. This demonstrates an important truth—one we shouldn't miss: *Authentically WISE people recognize when to lead and when to follow.*

SECOND: The Wise Men followed the Light, and Jesus is the Light of the World. The central symbol of Epiphany is *light*. John wrote about the birth of Jesus that "The true light that enlightens everyone was coming into the world." Later we're going to sing the best-known Epiphany hymn (the one that led the folks in East Texas to put firemen's helmets their Three Kings): "Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy Perfect Light."

The light of the brilliant new star guided these Persian astrologers to Jesus, and the Light of Christ is still shining in the darkness, just as it has since he was born in Bethlehem long ago. The question for us to answer is: *Where do we see his light today?* Like the Wise Men who found the newborn King not in Herod's palace but a humble house, so *we must be prepared to find the light of Christ shining in an UNEXPECTED place.*

So... Where is the light of Christ shining for *you*? Look where you might least expect. Is it in discovering contemplative prayer? Is it in giving yourself to serve the poor? Is it in communicating God's love to social outcasts? —Or is it in the most unexpected place of all: right in your own home and in your own family?

THIRD: When you find the One who is the object of your search, WORSHIP him! The Wise Men offered the newborn King three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Their gifts had mystic meaning. Some say they were symbols of the *magi* themselves—elements they used in the rituals of their religion. The gifts of the *magi* remind us that *true worship must be an offering of OURSELVES, our resources, our talents, our wealth, our skills, our time—everything we have.*

When you come to the One you seek, when you find Jesus, the Light of the World, give him all you have. Put yourself at his disposal. You'll never regret the decision.

FOURTH, and last: After the Wise Men had found Christ and worshiped him, they returned to their homes "by another road." If we're willing to be led, as the Wise Men were... If we are able to see the new thing that God is doing in our lives and in his world... If we come to Christ, the True Light, and offer our whole being to him in love... *then we're going to be CHANGED.*

Real worship always changes us. And if we're changed by our experience of Christ, then we're going to find ourselves taking "another road," a new road, a new way of moving forward with our life. We're not going to be satisfied with things as they used to be before we gave ourselves to Christ. We're not going to be content to stay in the comfortable old ruts—not if we've found Him and truly worshiped Him. *We're going to "go back home by another road."*

This fresh path will be a bit different for each of us. But our individual paths will have this in common: they'll be *new* to us, and on each of them the Light of Christ will shine to lead us on.

Follow that Light!