

## WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

### CALL TO WORSHIP:

*May he rule from sea to sea,*

*and from the River to the ends of the earth.*

*May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores bring tribute to him.*

*May the kings of Sheba and Seba present him gifts.*

*May all kings bow down to him,*

*and all nations serve him.*

(Psalm 72.8, 10-11)

Let us worship God.

**HYMN:** The first Nowell ...

### PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

We praise and thank you for your love, concern, and compassion for us, all of which you have demonstrated in coming into the world in human form in Jesus. We thank you for revealing yourself to us in him, so that we might come to know you better.

As we begin our worship, though, we confess that we don't always respond to these actions of yours in the way that you would like us to. Although you have given yourself generously to us, we hold back in giving ourselves to you. We *want* to belong to you, but often it's only on *our* terms and in our ways.

Have mercy on us, gracious God, and forgive us for our less-than-generous response to your generosity. By the work of the Holy Spirit, enable us to overcome the self-centeredness that causes us to want to keep you at arm's length, so that we may give ourselves to you willingly, gladly, and fully.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together now, as he taught us:

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

### ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*This is a trustworthy saying,*

*which deserves full acceptance:*

*"Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners".*

(1 Timothy 1.15)

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,*

*so that we might die to sin, and live for righteousness;*

*by his wounds, we have been healed.*

(1 Peter 2.24)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,

let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

### - OT Reading: Isaiah 60.1-9 - The future glory of Jerusalem

This reading is a message of hope, addressed to the city of Jerusalem, in the period in which the people of Israel were rebuilding the city, following their exile in Babylonia.

The passage speaks of a time in the future when Jerusalem would have a place of honor in the world. It envisions people of all nations being drawn to it, bringing with them all kinds of wealth.

### - Psalm:

The psalm for today is **Psalm 72** - "Endow the king with your justice, God".

Psalm 72 is a prayer for an unidentified king of Israel, asking that God would bring about his rule on earth through that king's reign.

It may originally have been used whenever a new king was crowned. Later on, though, when Israel no longer had kings of its own, the words of this psalm came to be seen as a description of the reign of an anticipated future king, called "the Messiah". Early Christians, then, interpreted the psalm as a prophecy about Jesus.

This is the traditional psalm for Epiphany, probably because it speaks about foreign kings bringing gifts to the king of Israel. It's probably through the influence of this psalm that people came to believe that the Magi who visited the young Jesus must've been kings.

The final verses of the psalm are a doxology that serves as the conclusion to the second part of the Book of Psalms, which consists of Psalms 42 to 72.

### - Letter Reading: Ephesians 3.2-13 - "The mystery of Christ"

In this reading, Paul writes about his ministry among Gentiles (that is, non-Jews), and about his discovery of the fact that God wishes Gentiles as well as Jews to believe in Jesus, and become part of the people of God.

### - Gospel Reading: Matthew 2.1-12 - The visit of the Magi

This is the story of the visit of the Magi (or "Wise Men"), which is found only in *Matthew's* Gospel. Jesus may have been as much as two years old at the time of their visit.

**HYMN:** What star is this?

## SERMON

On this Second Sunday of Christmas, I've decided once again to use the lectionary readings for Epiphany rather than those for this Sunday. Epiphany is always on the 6th of January, which means that it only occasionally falls on a Sunday. Most of the time, it occurs during the week, as it does this year. And since we Presbyterians don't have a custom of having a ser-

vice on Epiphany itself, as we do on Christmas Eve, that leaves us with three options: either skip the Epiphany story altogether, or lump it in with the readings for Christmas on Christmas Eve, or celebrate it on the Sunday just before Epiphany. It seems to me that the third option is the preferable one.

I say this because Epiphany is one of the four landmark festivals around which the seasons of the Christian Year are structured, the other three being Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. The story of the visit of the Magi thus deserves to be told and reflected on separately from the story of Jesus' birth; and so, that's what we're doing again this year.

Although the Epiphany story itself is well known, the *festival* of Epiphany tends to go by unnoticed each year, especially in our society as a whole. If you were to wish your neighbor a "Happy Epiphany" this Thursday, chances are he or she would have no idea what you were talking about. This is because the Epiphany story has, for some reason, traditionally been incorporated into the Christmas story. In my home congregation in Hespeler, for example, the Epiphany story was normally one of the scripture readings in the service on Christmas Eve. Some of our Christmas hymns also combine Epiphany with Christmas, such as "The first nowell", "What Child is this?", and "Angels from the realms of glory". In addition, nativity scenes traditionally show both shepherds and Magi at the stable where Jesus was born, despite the fact that the stories in Matthew 2 and Luke 2 are two entirely separate stories.

In case you're wondering about the *name* "Epiphany", it comes from the Greek word *epifáneia*, which means "appearance" or "manifestation". The festival was established sometime in the 300s as a celebration of Jesus' birth and baptism, events in which God "manifested" himself to human beings in the person of Jesus. This was soon after Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. At the same time, Jesus' birth was being celebrated *also* on the 25th of December. Church leaders, wanting uniformity of practice, eventually decided that the 25th of December would be the festival celebrating Jesus' birth; and it eventually came to be known as "Christmas". But, rather than dropping Epiphany altogether, they decided to change its focus. In the eastern, Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire, Epiphany became the celebration of Jesus' baptism and of his miracle of changing water into wine; while in the western, Latin-speaking part of the empire, Epiphany became the celebration of the visit of the Magi — that is, the "manifestation" of Jesus to Gentiles. This was in the days when the Christian faith was confined to southern Europe, western Asia, and northern Africa.

As for the Epiphany *story*, it's found only in the Gospel of Matthew. There's no reference to it at all in any of the other three Gospels.

In Matthew, the Epiphany story in effect takes the place of the Christmas story, since Matthew reports Jesus' birth in just the briefest possible way, right at the end of Chapter 1. All that he says is, *[Joseph] took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name "Jesus"* (Matthew 1.24b-25). That's all that Matthew has to say about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth — no census, no journey to Bethlehem, no stable or manger, no shepherds or angels. All those details are found in

Luke's Gospel.

The visit of the Magi — or Wise Men — is a separate event, then, which took place some time *after* Jesus' birth, as much as two years later. Jesus and his parents are still in Bethlehem, apparently living in a regular house.

The account of the visit of the Magi makes three significant points. The *first* is that Jesus is the true King of Israel. The *second* point is that even in his childhood, Jesus faced hostility from Israel's leaders — hostility that would eventually lead to his death on the cross. And the *third* point is that Jesus came into the world, not just for the people of Israel, but also for everyone else — for the world as a whole. Let's look at these one at a time.

The *first* point — that Jesus is the true king of Israel — reinforces what Matthew has already said in Chapter 1 of his Gospel. Matthew began his Gospel with a genealogy — a list of Jesus' ancestors, through Joseph, beginning with Abraham. Significantly, the genealogy includes the great King David and descendants of his who reigned over Israel up to the time of the Babylonian conquest and exile. Then, in the account of the annunciation to Joseph, which follows, the angel who appears to Joseph in a dream addresses him as *Joseph, son of David* (Matthew 1.20).

In the Epiphany story itself, then, the Magi, foreigners from somewhere east of Israel — possibly Babylonia or Persia — come to Jerusalem looking for *the one who has been born king of the Jews* (Matthew 2.2), having interpreted the appearance of a particular star as a sign that a new king had been born in Israel. Of course, Israel already had a king, King Herod. However, Herod was not a descendant of David, and not even an Israelite. He was an Idumean. The Idumeans were “cousins” of the Israelites, so to speak. Just as the Israelites were descendants of the patriarch Jacob, the Idumeans were descendants of Jacob's brother, Esau. In the Old Testament, they are called “Edomites”, and they lived in the region south of the Dead Sea. By New Testament times, they were called Idumeans, and had migrated north, into southern Israel. What all this boils down to is that Jesus had a *better* claim to the throne of Israel than Herod did. This is underscored by the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of David.

The Magi thus come to Israel looking for someone recently born to be “king of the Jews”. When they eventually find Jesus, they *[bow] down and [worship] him*, Matthew says (Matthew 2.11). The Greek word translated “worship” means to get down on one's hands and knees, and touch one's forehead to the ground. In the ancient world, that was the customary way of showing respect to someone greater than oneself, such as a king, and also, of course, God. In addition, the Magi present Jesus with the gifts we're all familiar with: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Although Christians have traditionally seen special significance in these gifts, Matthew himself says *nothing* about what they may signify; and the Magi probably saw them only as suitable gifts for a *king*; nothing more.

So then, Jesus' royal ancestry, his birth in Bethlehem, and the actions of the Magi all reinforce

Matthew's claim that Jesus is the true king of Israel — the long-awaited Messiah.

Incidentally, the actions of the Magi tie in with words found in today's psalm, Psalm 72, which speak of foreign kings presenting gifts to the king of Israel. The psalm says,

*May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores  
bring tribute to him.*

*May the kings of Sheba and Seba  
present him gifts.*

*May all kings bow down to him,  
and may all nations serve him.* (Psalm 72.10-11)

By the First Century, this psalm was seen as referring to the Messiah, the special king whom God would one day send to Israel. Early Christians then interpreted the psalm as a prophecy predicting the visit of the Magi — and it's because of *that* association that the Magi have come to be seen as *kings*, even though Matthew himself doesn't say they were. In all likelihood, they were astrologers, not kings.

Needless to say, the birth of someone destined to be king of Israel didn't sit well with King Herod, and that leads us to the *second* point that the Epiphany story makes — that Jesus, even in his childhood, faced hostility from Israel's leaders; hostility that would eventually lead to his death on the cross.

When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem looking for the one “born king of the Jews”, Herod is disturbed, seeing this unknown new king as a potential rival to his throne. Secular historians confirm that Herod was suspicious and paranoid about possible rivals. His hostility toward Jesus, then, would certainly be in keeping with what is known of his character. When he sends the Magi to Bethlehem, then, he instructs them to report to him on where and who this young king is, so that he too might *go and worship him* (Matthew 2.8). Of course, as we find out if we read on beyond the end of today's reading, Herod's true intention was not to “worship” Jesus at all, but rather to have him put to death. Joseph, Jesus' father, is thus warned by an angel to take the family to Egypt, in order to save Jesus' life — which he does.

This very early threat to Jesus' life foreshadows the hostility that Jesus would face from Israel's leaders during his ministry — hostility that would culminate in his terrible death on the cross. The Epiphany story, then, seems to be telling us that Jesus' death at Golgotha didn't just happen by chance, but that it was inevitable.

The *third* point made by the Epiphany story is that Jesus came into the world for the benefit of all human beings, not just the people of Israel. It's significant that the Magi were foreigners — non-Jews — Gentiles — people who presumably had no knowledge of Israel's faith, Israel's traditions, Israel's scriptures, or Israel's hopes. God chose to communicate the news of Jesus' birth to them in a most unorthodox way — not by an angel or a prophet, but through an astrological sign: the appearance of a new or unusual star. What exactly the star was, and how the Magi managed to understand what it meant are details that Matthew doesn't explain.

So the Magi come from who-knows-where, find Jesus, “worship” him, present their expensive gifts to him, and then head back home. And that’s the last we hear of them. We don’t know what long-term effect the visit had on them. Were their lives changed in some way? Did they become worshipers of Israel’s God? Did they share the news of their trip and their discovery in their homeland? Matthew doesn’t say.

Yet, somehow, their visit speaks of God’s interest in people outside of Israel as well as in the Israelites themselves. And their visit thus foreshadows the fact that the message about Jesus, crucified and risen, would eventually be shared with Gentiles as well as Jews.

This, then, is the link to today’s reading from the Letters, in which the apostle Paul speaks of God’s plan to incorporate Gentiles into the community of his people. Paul refers to this plan as a “mystery”; that is, a secret — something that hadn’t been made known previously, but was being revealed just then, in his own day. *This mystery*, he says, *is that, through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus* (Ephesians 3.6). “Heirs together”, “members together”, and “sharers together” with the people of Israel.

This would’ve been a difficult message for Christians from a Jewish background to accept. For generations, they had been taught that they, as the people of God, were to be a distinct people in the world, worshipping the one true God, and living in God’s ways. They were to be different from Gentiles, and were absolutely *not* to *copy* the ways of the Gentiles. They understood this to mean that they needed to keep their distance from Gentiles, and to guard themselves against Gentile influences.

Paul’s message, on the other hand, was that God was interested in Gentiles as well as Jews; that God wanted Gentiles and Jews together to be his people; and that God wanted believers in Jesus to focus on being an influence for good on Gentiles, rather than focusing on guarding themselves against bad influences from Gentiles.

The “mystery” or “secret” that Paul speaks of wasn’t actually all *that* secret, after all, since it was spoken of in various places in the Old Testament — including today’s reading from Isaiah, Chapter 60. In that passage, Isaiah, as God’s spokesperson, sketches a picture of God’s glory shining on Israel, and being reflected by Israel to the rest of the world. As a result, foreigners — that is, Gentiles — would be drawn to Israel, bringing their wealth with them. Isaiah says,

*Nations will come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn. ...  
the wealth on the seas will be brought to you,  
to you the riches of the nations will come. ...  
And all from Sheba will come,  
bearing gold and incense,  
and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.* (Isaiah 60.3, 5b, 6b)

This passage, too, has traditionally been interpreted as a prophetic prediction of the visit of the

Magi, probably because of its reference to “gold” and “incense”. But its message is bigger than just that. The purpose of the influx of foreigners and their wealth into Israel would be not so much to enrich Israel, as to glorify Israel’s God, which is the sense we get if we read beyond the end of today’s reading to the end of the chapter. A similar passage in Chapter 2 of Isaiah speaks of people of all nations going to the temple in Jerusalem to worship God and learn God’s ways. That’s the famous passage that speaks of people then beating their swords into plowshares, and so on (Isaiah 2.1-5).

God’s interest in the Gentiles, spoken of already in the Old Testament, and confirmed in the story of the visit of the Magi, comes into full view in the mission of the early church, when Paul and other apostles began sharing the message about Jesus in places outside Israel. True, they went to places where there were already established Jewish communities, but they quickly found that their message appealed to Gentiles as well. Indeed, Gentiles often accepted their message more readily than Jews did.

The Epiphany story, then, speaks of God’s interest in all humanity, not just a particular ethnic group. As the visit of the Magi foreshadowed the hostility against Jesus that would culminate in his death on the cross, it also foreshadowed the early church’s mission to the Gentile world. Finally, in the First Century A.D., people from outside Israel were coming to faith in Israel’s God in significant numbers, unlike anything that had ever happened before. The community of God’s people was on its way to becoming an international, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural community, reaching clear around the world, as it does today.

What does the Epiphany story teach us, then? *First*, that Jesus is the true, legitimate king of Israel — the long-awaited Messiah. *Second*, that the hostility he experienced from Israel’s leaders even in his childhood foreshadowed the hostility he would experience later on, in his ministry, culminating in his death on the cross. And *third*, that God was reaching out beyond the people of Israel to give people of all nations the opportunity to become part of the community of his people.

**HYMN:** As with gladness men of old ...

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Our Father in heaven:

We give you thanks for revealing yourself to us human beings in the person of Jesus. Through him, you have shown us that you are closer to us than we may think, and not as different from us as we may think. Through him also, you have shown us what you want us as your people to be like. Sometimes we are surprised by your interest in us, but always we are grateful.

We thank you that, through Jesus, you acted to reconcile sinful human beings to yourself — not just through his death on the cross, but also through his coming among us in the first place. We thank you that, by coming into the world in him, you began the work of bridging the gap

- between ourselves and you — a gap that we human beings are unable to bridge ourselves.
- We thank you also that, through Jesus, you have acted to reconcile us human beings to each other, as well. We thank you that the visit of the Magi is a sign that you give people of all races, tribes, and languages the opportunity to become part of your people — a people in which distinctions of race, nationality, and language no longer make any difference. Help us and all Christians everywhere to embrace your vision of a humanity brought together under Jesus — a people diverse in many ways, but nonetheless united by a shared relationship with you.
- Hear our prayer, then, for the world around us, in which people have not yet caught your vision of reconciliation and unity; in which people are divided along racial, ethnic, and socio-economic lines; in which people prefer to attack each other rather than to seek to understand each other. Through your work in the world, both within and outside the ministry of the church, may people catch your vision of reconciliation and harmony. Guide and strengthen all those who work to bring that vision closer and closer to reality. In that regard, we give you thanks in particular today for the life and work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who played a major role in the struggle to do away with apartheid in South Africa, and to bring about reconciliation and healing in that country.
- We pray for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are experiencing difficulties and troubles of various kinds, in particular, those whom we name before you now in silence: \_\_\_\_\_. Grant your blessing to each one, we pray, so that they may receive your strength, your guidance, or your healing, according to their needs.
- As we pray for people in positions of authority today, we pray for our Governor General, Mary Simon. We thank you for what she represents as the first Indigenous person to serve in that position, and we pray that you would continue to give her wisdom and strength as she carries out her responsibilities.
- We pray for people affected by the wildfires in Colorado this past week, especially those who have lost their homes, businesses, or workplaces. Grant them strength to withstand the tragedy that has come upon them, we pray; and grant that they may also receive material assistance as they seek to salvage what they can, and to rebuild their lives and their homes. We ask the same for all others who have been affected by natural disasters in the past year, both here in Canada and around the world.
- As we endure a spell of cold weather in our part of the country, we give thanks for those who work in the cold to provide the services we depend on, and we pray for their safety. We pray also for the safety of those who are homeless, that shelter may be provided for them, and that the public may be motivated to provide greater support to efforts to provide adequate housing for low-income people.
- We pray once again about the pandemic. We give thanks for the efforts of all those who give leadership in this crisis, those who provide health care, and those who produce or administer vaccines. We ask for your continued blessing on each one, especially those who feel worn down by the stress the pandemic has caused. We pray too for healing for relationships that have been strained by differences of opinion regarding COVID-19, restrictions, or vaccina-



tions; that people may continue to care about each other in spite of their differences. As we begin a new year, we give you thanks for seeing us through the past year — for all the ways in which you have blessed, sustained, and enriched us; and we pray for your continued blessing in the year ahead. We pray especially that this may be the year in which the pandemic is finally brought under control, and in which life may finally return to normal. We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

## **OFFERING**

### **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**

Loving God:

As the Magi long ago brought gifts to Jesus, we likewise bring gifts to you — not gold, incense, or myrrh, but simple gifts of money, through which we support and participate in the ministry of your church throughout the world.

May our gifts be symbols of our love for you and our gratitude to you. Through them, may people be helped in both spiritual and material ways in your name.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**HYMN:** Earth has many a noble city

### **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,  
 in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,  
 with confidence that he who came into the world as the light of the world  
 will light your way,  
 and never leave you in darkness.

And may God bless you:

May he guide and strengthen you in your daily living,  
 and give you peace and joy;  
 in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.