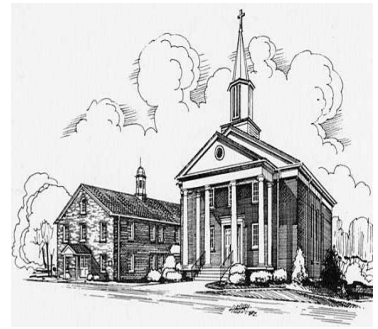


*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Feast of*

## **The Epiphany**

January 6

RCL



**Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

**Psalms 72:1-7, 10-14**

### **The Collect**

O God, by the leading of a star you manifested your only Son to the peoples of the earth: Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;

but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.

Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together, they come to you;

your sons shall come from far away,  
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.

Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and rejoice,

because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

**Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 Page 685, BCP**

*Deus, iudicium*

- <sup>1</sup>Give the King your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the King's Son;  
<sup>2</sup>That he may rule your people righteously and the poor with justice;  
<sup>3</sup>That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, and the little hills bring righteousness.  
<sup>4</sup>He shall defend the needy among the people; he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.  
<sup>5</sup>He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, from one generation to another.  
<sup>6</sup>He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, like showers that water the earth.  
<sup>7</sup>In his time shall the righteous flourish; there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.  
<sup>10</sup>The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall pay tribute, and the kings of Arabia and Saba offer gifts.  
<sup>11</sup>All kings shall bow down before him, and all the nations do him service.  
<sup>12</sup>For he shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress, and the oppressed who has no helper.  
<sup>13</sup>He shall have pity on the lowly and poor; he shall preserve the lives of the needy.  
<sup>14</sup>He shall redeem their lives from oppression and violence, and dear shall their blood be in his sight.

## **Ephesians 3:1-12**

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

## Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



## SERMON

How well do you know the Christmas story? I don't mean your family traditions about Christmas. I mean the Christmas story as it appears in Matthew and Luke. My impression is that we modern people sort of whoosh by the details of the Biblical and historical story on our way to the comforting Christmas story that is reflected in our own family traditions. On The Epiphany, we might do well to remind ourselves of the details for no traditions of family or culture can adequately contain the miracle of The Epiphany. Let's peer back 2,000 years or so and see what we can see.

History calls Herod "the Great" but a better name might be "the Horrible". Herod was the Judean Incredible Hulk. You wouldn't like him if you made him mad, and it was perilously easy to make him mad. Nobody liked him, everybody hated him, and yet, he refused to eat worms.

It wasn't hard to understand the intensity of feeling about him. Judea was an occupied country and Herod was a client king of Rome. As if that weren't bad enough, nobody but Herod thought he was a Jew. He practiced Judaism, but his father was an Idumean and his mother a Nabatean.

The tale of his time would be too lengthy to report here, but to make a long story short, he was named "King of the Jews" by the Roman Senate sometime around 40 BC. He then had to invade Jerusalem with Roman troops to dispose Antigonus, who thought **he** was King of the Jews. After sending Antigonus off to be either crucified or beheaded, depending on which source you trust, and installing himself on the throne with Roman soldiers to guard him you can just imagine how delighted he was to hear from these Eastern gentlemen that the "King of the Jews" had been born in Bethlehem.

That's what we tend to omit from the Christmas story – the coming of the Christ child upset the stakeholders of the status quo. They sensed that something was up, and they were **not** happy about that. Indeed, Herod reacted with shocking violence.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men.

There is one more thing to know about Herod the Horrible: he died in 4 BC. If Matthew's account is accurate, and Jesus was born during the time of Herod, He was born before the year 4 BC. BC stands for "Before Christ" so you can see the irony. This little historical oddity comes about because of a hiccup in the calendar which occurred in the Sixth Century AD. We use "AD" to indicate years after the birth of Christ because a monk named Dionysus Exegus, or "Little Denny" invented the idea of numbering years since Christ's birth, rather than numbering years from the reign of the Emperor. Sad to say, Little Denny messed up the math.

Assuming that Herod was better at math than Little Denny, we can say that Jesus was born two years prior to the visit of the wise men, sometime around 6 or 7 BC, and Matthew tells us the visit of the wise men wasn't to a borrowed stable as recounted in Luke, but to a house. Luke has shepherds and no wise men. Matthew has wise men and no shepherds. Luke has a stable. Matthew has a house. What's going on here? That's not the story told by the crèche on top of the TV!

Indeed, it is not. The story told by the crèche is a mashup of the two stories from Luke and Matthew. Luke tells us of the birth. Matthew tells us of an event perhaps two years later called The Epiphany. The story told by the crèche is the story we have devised for ourselves to represent the Christmas story. It is a story which comforts us, but it is not the stories told us in these two Gospel accounts.

Well, there's nothing wrong with that. We all need to be comforted. We all need to have a moment when we can lose ourselves in a romanticized and comforting tradition so that we can face the new year with some courage. Life can be tough. We need bucking up. That's what the crèche offers us — a moment when we can be all Hallmark Card about the baby in the manger, but it is not the story told in Matthew, for when the



Epiphany rolls around, things get serious. The Epiphany is when the stakeholders in the status quo get wind that something is up, and they are not happy about that. The stakeholders in the status quo are **never** happy about that.

Have you ever wondered why that is? If the coming of Christ into the world is the Good News, why do the stakeholders in the status quo, like Herod, react to it so negatively? Herod the Horrible killed every child around Bethlehem in an attempt to expunge the good news, based only on a tip from some foreigners. Julian the Apostate, the last pagan Emperor of Rome, tried to wipe Christians out and re-establish the old gods of Rome, complaining:

These impious Galileans not only feed their own poor, but ours also; welcoming them into their agapae, they attract them, as children are attracted, with cakes.

Why are the stakeholders in the status quo so threatened by a religion which offers to feed their poor, which preaches only love to one another? Shouldn't that be good news for everyone? What's so scary about

C'mon people now, Smile on your brother  
Ev'rybody get together try and love one another right now<sup>1</sup>

I think we need to abandon our romanticized crèche and look honestly into the meaning of the Good News. To be honest, after 2,020 years (remember Little Denny messed up the math), the Gospel isn't news any more and for an awful lot of people it isn't good, either. I think that we, within the church, need to take a second look at the good news and see if we can tease out what is so threatening about it. In fact, I think we within the church need to find the distressing parts of the good news and embrace them, for that is truly God speaking to us. The warm and cozy bits are just us hugging ourselves.

When I try to do that – to tease out what is so threatening about the coming of Jesus – the only answer that suggests itself to me is that the stakeholders in the status quo read

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<sup>1</sup> The Youngbloods “Get Together”

the message of Jesus, indeed, his very existence, as threatening something which they treasure. The problem seems to be what we treasure.

Did you hear what a clever thing I did there? I stopped talking about “them” and started talking about “us”. I think we have more in common with the ones reacting so violently to the presence of Jesus than we care to admit. I think that’s why we construct the Hallmark Card version of the Christmas story and put it on top of the TV. The real Christmas story — the story of God Himself entering the world as one of us to correct us — is just too scary. We would prefer not to look at what it is within us which made God come into His Creation saying, “You’re doing it wrong. Here. Let me show you.” God Incarnate is just another way to say the end of the status quo and our deliverance from our mistaken understanding of what it means to be a part of God’s Creation. The stakeholders of the status quo are **never** happy about that, and they are us.

So, what are we stakeholders of the status quo protecting? What do we truly treasure, excluding UK ball for the present. Two things: We treasure the things we have accumulated and we treasure our autonomy. We seem to entertain the myth that it is possible for us to exist apart from God’s Creation, and to carve out from God’s Creation a portion which we then refer to as ours, separate from the rest of Creation. That’s clearly wrong. All of Scripture teaches that God protects those with little, and deals harshly with those who try to appropriate His Creation.

The fact is that we are all part of God’s Creation. We cannot carve out parts of God’s Creation and claim it for ourselves, and we can’t declare ourselves a sovereign nation apart from God’s Creation. When we engage in the myth that we live in our own Creation rather than in God’s what we really are doing is deliberately separating ourselves from God, and we’ve no one to blame but ourselves for the consequences. “Your creation is over there, God. This little pile of filth is all mine. As for the rest of your children who in want, they are no concern of mine. They can take a bath, get a job and look after themselves. If there are no jobs to be had, and no place to take a bath, that’s no

business of mine.”

In his New Year’s Homily this year, the Pope warned of, "the prevalence of a selfish and individualistic mindset which also finds expression in an unregulated capitalism, various forms of terrorism and criminality". In his full message the pope called for a new economic model and ethical regulations for markets, saying the global financial crisis was proof that capitalism does not adequately protect society's weakest members.

The stakeholders of the status quo **really** hate that. This is a capitalist country. We really **believe** in capitalism. Capitalism is one of the major engines which allow us to accumulate stuff and to display our autonomy. What business has the Bishop of Rome being critical of something we hold so dear as capitalism? We Americans understand that an unregulated market based upon capitalist principles is the best way to the pursuit of happiness, by which we mean personal autonomy and the collection of a personal pile of filth.

Somebody posted a picture on Facebook recounting a conversation with the Buddha this week. It went like this:

A man once told the Buddha, “I want happiness.”

The Buddha replied, “First, remove ‘I’, that’s ego. Then remove ‘want’, that’s desire. And now all you’re left with is Happiness.”

The language of Christianity would recount this conversation in similar terms.

A man once told Jesus, “I want happiness.”

Jesus replied, “First, remove ‘I’, for your life is not your own. Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it<sup>2</sup>. Then remove ‘want’. For you live within God’s creation, and all is His. Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also<sup>3</sup>. And now all you’re left with is Happiness for happy are those who

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2 Matt 16:25

3 Matt 6:19-21

trust in the Lord<sup>4</sup>.”

Jesus wasn't born in 1 AD. The accounts in Matthew and Luke do not put the Wise Men and the Shepherds at the stable. The birth of Jesus was not anything so tidy as the crèche on your TV. These are all whitewash we have applied to the miracle of Jesus' birth to tidy it up for us so that we don't have to look at what is within us that requires God to come into His Creation to correct us in the first place. We don't want to look within to see why God Himself had to enter His Creation to say, “You're doing it wrong. Here. Let me show you.” We'd much rather hand back our nicely painted crèche and assure God that we have tidied it up for Him.

It won't do, church. If we are to be honest with God, we have to be honest with ourselves. What we **want** is to remodel God's Creation as we have done with the Christmas and Epiphany stories, so that we can carve out our little portion of it for our own amusement. What God teaches is that His Creation is founded upon love and service to others and has nothing to do with hoarding and controlling His Creation. God created us to find happiness in loving and serving others, if we will listen to Him. We have distorted God's Creation when we seek happiness in loving and serving ourselves to the exclusion of all others.

I was around for the riots in Lexington. I was a cop. I still remember the sort of anger that was generated in me and the other cops by some hippy saying, “Peace and love, brother.” I didn't want to give up my authority as a cop. I was lectured this week that the world described for us by Jesus is a fable, and that we must live in “the real world” which requires that our homes be armed fortresses. The one lecturing me did not wish to give up the sense of security granted by a shotgun beside the bed. I have been lectured quite a bit lately about the evils of government regulations by people who don't wish to give up their autonomy, no matter what the cost to the economy or to those who do the actual labor. All these things are distortions of God's creation.

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4 Proverbs 16:20b

The Epiphany is when the stakeholders in the status quo get wind that something is up. For us, individually, the Epiphany is when we stakeholders in our own myths get wind that God has entered into us to correct us. Welcome him!

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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The squirrely thing are those wise men from the east. They have gone to considerable trouble to arrive in Bethlehem, and they offered up gifts of very great worth. What do these visitors from afar see that Herod cannot see, that the Pharisees and the Scribes will be unable to see, that Pilate will not notice?