

A Sermon for Epiphany Sunday, Year C  
Matthew 2:1–12 ~ January 7, 2007  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *Ripples in the Pond of Life.*

**T**oday, we are observing the feast day of the Epiphany of Our Lord. The word, “epiphany,” means to show forth, or to illuminate, or to reveal. And when Christians describe an event as an epiphany, we’re saying that there is something about that event which reveals, or brings to light, something about God which we didn’t know before.

Throughout her two thousand-year history, the Church has recognized three events in the life of Jesus that stood apart, and were somehow unique as epiphanies: the visit of the wise men, the baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine at a friend’s wedding in Cana of Galilee. And, for a time, all three events were remembered and celebrated on the same day. Now, however, the first two have been given their own special feast days of observance – the Epiphany of Our Lord, and the Baptism of Our Lord – and the third has been relegated to simply being mentioned in a gospel reading. But, even though these three events are now being remembered on different days of the church calendar, what they reveal still remains essentially the same: that, not only is Jesus the Son of God, but also he is the renewer of lives.

Now, if you think about these three events, it’s easy to see that there is something either explicitly or implicitly miraculous going on. In fact, miracles have often been associated with epiphanies, but the miracles themselves have never been the focus of the event. They simply serve to get our attention, and alert us to the fact that something special is taking place; and specifically, that God is intervening in the affairs of the world, and is doing something new in the lives of his people. But epiphanies are not meant to stand on their own and being admired, like artwork in a gallery. They are meant to change the way we see the world, and the way we live in the world. And it’s not unusual for them to begin as small things, like the birth of a baby boy in a little town like Bethlehem, or someone preparing for their baptism, or a family celebrating a wedding. But then, like a pebble that is dropped into water, they set off a series of concentric ripples that get bigger and bigger and bigger, until the entire surface of the water, even if imperceptibly, has been set into motion. And we who were witnesses of the original event, are now participants in the events that follow. And people who were once strangers, are now journeying together, carried along by the same tide. And so, epiphanies begin, perhaps, with the miraculous, but they are always ending in new, and often in renewed, relationships.

A perfect example of all this is Shirley Smith. She passed away last week, after waging a courageous battle against cancer, and tomorrow morning we will have a funeral service to celebrate her life. But when Shirley came into our lives, it was as if God was dropping a pebble into the waters of our lives. Through her – through her personality, demeanor, and temperament – we learned something about the nature of God, and people were brought into this community of faith, and new relationships were formed, and older relationships were renewed. Although I

would be hard-pressed to point to any one event in her life and call it a miracle, nevertheless, I can see the fingerprints of God throughout her life.

Now, having said all that, let's take a few moments and turn our attention to today's gospel reading, the story of how "wise men from the East" came to the cradle of Christ. One of the favorite hymns associated with this story, a hymn which we sang at the beginning of this service, is *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. However, if you were paying close attention to the gospel reading, you probably picked up on the fact that the text says nothing about them being kings, or that there were three of them. But what we do know about them comes from the fact that the Greek word which Matthew uses to describe them is *magos*. That means they were, in the ancient world, men of wisdom and learning, who studied things like astrology, dream divination, and the natural sciences. And *magi* (the plural form of *magos*) were often employed by kings and rulers to provide them with direction and guidance. So, when Jesus was born, *magi* from the East came to pay him homage.

But the real question is *why* did they come at that time? Well, in those days, people believed they could foretell the future from the stars, and they believed that a person's destiny was settled by the star under which he was born. It's not hard to see how that belief arose: the stars seemed to follow an unvarying course through the night skies and, thereby, they came to represent the order of the universe. But, if something different were to suddenly happen – if an unexpected bright star should suddenly appear, and the unvarying order of the heavens was disrupted – it could very much seem as if God was breaking into his own order, and announcing some special thing.

We don't know what brilliant star those ancient *Magi* saw, but a number of suggestions have been offered. For example, in 11 B.C. Halley's comet was clearly visible shooting across the skies. And in 7 B.C. there was a brilliant alignment of the planets Saturn and Jupiter. Finally – and for me this is the most interesting – in the years 5 to 2 B.C., there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon. During those three years, on the first day of the Egyptian month of *Mesori*, Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, rose with the dawn, and shone with an unusual brightness – almost like a second sun. Now the name of the Egyptian month *Mesori* means "the birth of a prince," and to ancient astrologers such an event would almost certainly have signaled the birth of a great leader. In the end, we don't know really know what the *Magi* saw, but it was their profession to watch the heavens, and something they saw alerted them to a new thing happening.

It may be hard for our modern minds to believe that a group of men, scholars or otherwise, would set out on what must have been a long and costly journey, simply because they saw something odd in the skies. But the interesting thing is that, at approximately the same time Jesus was born, there was in the world a strange feeling of expectation that a king was coming. And how do we know this? People wrote about it. The Roman historian Suetonius described how there *had spread, over all the Orient, an old and established belief, that it was fated, at that time, for men coming from Judaea to rule the world*. Another Roman historian, Tacitus, tells of the belief that *there was a firm persuasion ... that at this very time, the East was to grow powerful*,

*and rulers coming from Judaea were to acquire universal empire.* And the Jewish historian Josephus would write of the Jewish belief that *at about that time, one from their country, should become governor of the habitable earth.* At almost the same time as Jesus was born, the Roman Emperor Augustus was being hailed as the Savior of the World, and Virgil, the Roman poet, was writing his Fourth Eclogue (*i.e.*, a short pastoral poem, often in the form of a dialogue), which is known as the *Messianic Eclogue*, about the golden days to come. In other words, when Jesus was born, the world was looking for a new king. So it's no wonder that, when the *Magi* told King Herod that they were looking for "the child who has been born king of the Jews" – that they were looking, in other words, for someone who might one day compete for Herod's throne – that he didn't take this news at all well.

Now, it has to be admitted that the Bible probably contains more Truth than fact, and that the authors of the various books of the Bible, in an effort to convey the Truth, might have played a little loose and easy with the facts. But there is no reason to think that the story of the visit of the *Magi* to the cradle of Jesus is only a sweet legend. The events which Matthew depict are precisely the sorts of things that could have happened in the ancient world. When Jesus was born, the world was in a state of eager, and anxious, expectation. Many people were waiting for God to do something new, and the desire for God was in their hearts. And so, it was into a waiting world that Jesus came. And when he came, representatives from the ends of the earth, the *Magi*, were gathered at his cradle. It was then, and remains for us today, the first sign and symbol of God's final conquest of the world.

Two thousand years ago, God dropped a pebble into that pond which we call Bethlehem. And the ripple effects of that event are still being felt today. And people today, as they were then, are still looking for of guidance, and community, and meaning for their lives. And the task that God has given to us, is to remember the story of what first caused those ripples, and to help others enter into a renewed life. You and I are, on this day, in this moment, for forever, the living epiphanies of God. With what began as a miracle two thousand years ago, has resulted in countless renewed lives. And, by the grace of God, we are a part of that process of renewal. And through us, that process will continue.

Amen.