

20+C+M+B+16
“Bless This House”
Matthew 2:1-12
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“Epiphany means appearing—that Christ appeared and still appears to us”

So what do we really know? How many of them were there? Three? It never says. Kings of orient like the song says? No, not really, just star-gazers from somewhere in the east. Where did they find Jesus? In the stable the same night as the shepherds? Probably not, Matthew says they found him in a house.

We don't really know very much about them, these wise men from the east. We know they saw a star and followed it to Bethlehem and that they gave gifts to the Holy Family. We don't even know how many of them there were, only that Matthew lists three different gifts that they gave; gold and frankincense and myrrh. One of the ancient Christian traditions says that there were two, another that there were twelve wise men. But we do know that from the earliest of Christian times this story has enthralled believers, in fact in the early church it was this story about the star and these strange visitors much more than the story of the shepherds, as shown by the earliest of art in the catacombs in Rome, that spoke to Christians. Some of the earliest of Christian writers identify January 6th as the day upon which the wise arrived in Bethlehem and they seem to treat this as a much more important day than the actual day that Jesus was born. So important that in many countries it is January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany, or the Feast of the Three Kings that receives the most attention. In some countries, it is on the Eve of Epiphany that children will leave their shoes at the end of their beds filled with hay. They hope that sometime in the night the three kings will come and bring a present to them as they did to the Christ Child, and being the considerate children that they are, the hay is there to feed the camels ridden by the wise men. But why is Epiphany so important? Why was the visit of the wise men so vital to the church? In the earliest days of the Christian church we think that three main holy days were celebrated. Easter, of course, the resurrection of Jesus; Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the

church; and the third was Epiphany, not Christmas. Why Epiphany, what's so important about Epiphany?

Epiphany is a Greek word that means “appearance.” The visit of the wise men was believed to be the first recognition that God was appearing to the world in the person of Jesus. And it was important to the early church because these wise men were traditionally people from different cultures, symbolizing that the whole world was recognizing that Jesus was born. By the sixth century, it was assumed that there were not only three magi, but that they had names and faces. One ancient scholar says:

“The magi were the ones who gave gifts to the Lord. The first is said to have been Melchior, an old man with white hair and a long beard . . . who offered gold to the Lord as to a king. The second, Gaspar by name, young and beardless and ruddy complexioned . . . honored him as God by his gift of incense, an oblation worthy of divinity. The third, black-skinned and heavily bearded, named Balthasar . . . by his gift of myrrh testified to the Son of Man who was to die.”¹

According to tradition, the three wise men gave their gifts and then went back to their separate homes, but then legend says as old men they met again in what is now Armenia in the year 54 to celebrate the feast of Christmas, after which each of them soon passed away: St. Melchior on January 1st at 116 years old; St. Balthasar on January 6th, aged 112; and St. Gaspar on January 11th, aged 109.² After their deaths it is said that their bones were gathered together and brought to Constantinople. The Emperor Constantine then gave them to the bishop of Milan in Italy in 314. They were later given to the bishop of Cologne in what is now Germany in the year 1164. The shrine of the Three Kings is in the Cathedral of Cologne to this day. These visitors to the Holy Family have inspired such reverence and interest that for much of the world, it is their visit that is recognized by gift giving and feasts and legends, not Christmas Day. Why do you think that is? Why is Epiphany so important?

In some parts of the world on the Feast of Epiphany people come to church and receive pieces of chalk that have been blessed by a priest. They then take these pieces of chalk home and above their doors they write the letters C, M, and B, each letter separated by a cross, and then they write the year. The three letters are for Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and the new year is listed as a prayer for prosperity

1 Quoted in Brown, Raymond, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 199.

2 Brown, p. 199.

for the coming year. Those letters are written in your order of worship below the sermon title. But the letters C, M, and B are not just the names of the three wise men, but they also stand for the Latin words, *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, which means Christ bless this house. For much of the world, this day is so important because Epiphany is not just the time for gift giving, as the wise gave gifts to the child, but it is a recognition that Christ comes to each of our houses. The appearing of Christ is not just to the Jewish people two thousand years ago, but Epiphany is the appearance of Christ to the whole world, as represented by the non-Jewish wise men, and to each and every one of us.

Christ bless this house, is a prayer for Epiphany for each of us to take home. But it is also a prayer for this house. Christ bless this house. This house of worship, this house of prayer, this house in which Christ's people gather. Christ bless this house. How would we like Christ to bless us this year? Have you thought about that? What would be a blessing to this house? Would we like more members—would that be a sign of Christ's blessing on us? Would we like more financial security, more stewardship pledges—is that the sign that Christ is with us? After all one of the gifts of the wise was gold, right? An avoidance of conflict—that everyone gets along would be a sign of the blessing, wouldn't it? Or might it be something else? Might the blessing of Christ come in some way that we don't expect? Maybe the blessing of Christ will come to us in the way that the wise came to the house where Mary and Joseph and Jesus dwelt. Maybe like these visitors from the east, strangers will come to us. What will we do? Will we see them as a blessing? Or will we wonder where they came from and mistrust them, wondering what they want, and send them out as quickly as possible. Maybe it will be a youth we don't recognize as belonging to us, or a child that cries through the whole service, or an older person who is just going to be a drag on our resources because they have nothing to contribute. Nothing except the blessing of Christ. Epiphany means appearing. It means that Christ may appear to us at any time, in ways we don't expect. Celebrating Epiphany also means that it is not over. Christ still appears. When we pray “Christ bless this house,” we are praying that Christ will appear here. Do you think he will? How will he come? How will he come to us, how will he bless this house with his

presence? Will he also bless your house this year, how will he bless your life, how will he appear to you?

When I was a kid we had a Charlie Brown book called “Christmas is . . .” with little drawings of the Peanuts characters and a little saying about what Christmas is about. Some were funny, some were just cute, but the only one I really remember is a picture of Linus looking out the window, holding on to his blanket, gazing at the sky and saying “Christmas is wishing you could have seen the Star of Bethlehem.” I like star-gazing enough that my family gave me a telescope this year for Christmas and so I relate to Linus, I wish I could have seen that star. But that wish assumes that we can't, because that star no longer shines, that it only shone for that time 2000 years ago. But maybe it never stopped. Epiphany says that the light of Christ still shines, but maybe we see it differently. Maybe the light comes to you in a song, or in a face, or in a book, or in an embrace, or in words of love, or an act of grace. Epiphany means appearing, and Christ still appears to us—his light still shines if we will open our eyes—he still blesses this house and your house and my house with his presence.