



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Feast of the Epiphany, Sunday, January 8th, 2012

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

Most people – theologians, included – tend to view the Three Wise Men as exotic characters who add color to the drama of Jesus' birth, but who aren't truly essential to it. The way they're portrayed in pictures, plays and movies underlines this: They look more like extras from *Lord of the Rings* or *the Hobbit* than personages from the Gospels.

But if they aren't essential to the Gospel, why do we celebrate their arrival in Bethlehem as one of the most important feasts of the Christian Year? After all, the Feast of the Epiphany, of course, marks Jesus' revelation of himself not solely to the Three "Wise Guys" – as one of our young acolytes in New York once called them – but to all mankind, Jews and gentiles.

The descent of the Holy Spirit at his baptism was an epiphany. So, too, was his youthful teaching session in the Temple; so, too, was his Transfiguration on the mountain. But Jesus' revelation of himself to the Wise Men is our primary celebration, the one foremost in our minds when we think of the Epiphany.

Some claim the reason we celebrate the Wise Men is they – like most of Christians of the Western Church – are gentiles. The Feast is an important reminder of God's grace and loving

kindness to all mankind, including those who, by genes and geography, were excluded from his initial covenant with his chosen people.

But there is more to it than that. If it was simply a question of finding a suitable gentile to celebrate there are plenty of other candidates deserving of the accolade. The Centurion who said "Lord, I am not worthy thou shouldst come under my roof." might be seen as an equally laudable candidate.

The Wise Men, however, are unique in at least one important respect. Unlike the Centurion who had met Jesus as an adult, face to face, and had heard him teach and was probably to some degree acquainted with Holy Scripture, the Wise Men were brought to Christ solely by divinely-inspired intellectual endeavor.

These men we picture as magicians were, by the standards of their times, cutting edge scientists. If they lived today they wouldn't be shuffling around in mysterious caves in pointy hats, they would be dressed in baggy tweed jackets with leather patches at the elbows, winning Nobel Prizes and educating young skulls full of mush at Ivy League universities.

Their scientific theories might seem quaint, bizarre even, to us today, but we have the

benefit of two millennia of Western Christian enlightenment behind us. They didn't. They had no special revelation of God and his purpose in creation. They simply had their own human intellects to rely on.

They were astronomers and astrologers. That might sound a tad strange to us, but they had little else to go on. God had not spoken to them from the burning bush. He had not given them the Tablets of the Law on Mount Sinai. They had deduced that because creation was so ordered, so logical, there had to be an intelligence behind it. And they used the best scientific instrument yet devised – the human brain – to analyze and explore that discovery.

Careful observation over centuries – millennia, in fact – demonstrated that the Sun and the Moon exert immensely powerful influences on the earth. For instance, the Sun dictates climatic conditions and weather – hence times of plenty and times of famine. The Moon, in turn, governs the tides.

Thus, it didn't take a great leap of logic to figure that, if the Sun and the Moon influence the physical world, they exert a similarly powerful influence on human beings. And it also seemed no less reasonable to conclude that other heavenly bodies exerted similar – though perhaps not so easily divined – influences on creation.

The Wise Men were scientists engaged in analyzing the heavens in order to predict what was coming down the pike for mankind and, then, attempting to manipulate their findings to forestall baleful outcomes and produce happy ones. In short, their goals were not so different from those of many scientists today. Modern astronomers tell us an unusual conjunction of stars and planets occurred

sometime between B.C. 6 and B.C. 1. To the human eye, it appeared to be an extraordinarily bright star. The Three Wise Men – theorizing it portended the birth of a remarkably important leader – saddled up their camels, the First Century equivalent of Humvees, and launched an expedition to test their hypothesis.

Their star led them to Judea, where, being conventional sorts of folk, they looked for the child in a place one might expect a world leader to be born – the king's palace. Then, following the directions of Herod, a man they by no means trusted, they headed off for Bethlehem, a one-horse town in the boondocks, where they came face to face with what appeared to be an unremarkable married couple who had set up house with their new born son in a converted stable.

I suspect that at this point most scientists, ancient and modern, would have thrown in the towel and headed for home to recheck their data. The remarkable thing about these three men is that they recognized the child of that unremarkable couple as the object of their quest. And they offered him the tokens of divine leadership they had brought with them – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The Wise Men understood God is not obliged to conform to human preconceptions – something many today do not grasp. Their recognition of the babe in that obscure stable as the savior of the world is as great an epiphany as that granted to St. Peter when he blurted out: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus' reply to Peter applies equally to them: "Blessed art thou for flesh and blood hath not revealed it to thee, but my Father which is in heaven." *AMEN.*