

Good morning! A blessed and joyous Feast of the Epiphany to all of you. As many of you know, the word “Epiphany” refers to a revealing or a making manifest. The questions that we must then ask are, “What is being revealed?” and, “To whom is it revealed?” For our specific feast day, the “what” question is answered in that it is Jesus Christ who is being revealed; this follows naturally upon the heels of the Christmas season where Jesus Christ enters into the world. So first, God enters into creation in Jesus Christ; secondly, the “to whom” question is answered with, God reveals Himself to humanity, the caretakers of His Creation.

Now many of the Christmas events are about manifesting the Christ child to the world as God. Specifically we think about the angels appearing to the shepherds to proclaim the birth of Jesus Christ. When we consider today’s feast, however, there is an added distinction to note – that the Incarnate God was not merely revealed to be God within the chosen people of Israel. Jesus was not God of just the Jews, but He was God for all of humanity. Jesus was not the savior of just the Jews, but He was the savior of all humanity.

The core story of Epiphany is that visit of the wise men to the Christ child. These men recognized who Jesus was and traveled from a great distance to come worship Him. They were not Jews. They did not have the Hebrew scripture, but they studied the skies and perceived that the divine had entered into the world. These Gentiles perceived that the savior of the world was come. The world was no longer the same. The relationship of transcendent reality to the physical world was suddenly different. Perhaps this was a very subtle change, but for those who were sensitive to the spiritual realm, a shift had taken place, and this change was evidenced in reality by a new star in the sky. Had no one been looking at the stars, had they not been studied, then perhaps this new star would have gone unnoticed. But God knew that the sign of the savior in the sky would be noticed. God left a signpost to be followed.

It is interesting that God doesn’t send a prophet to the wise men. God didn’t engrave this message upon a stone tablet with explicit directions of how to get to the Christ child in Bethlehem. God didn’t send a lightning bolt to carve the path to Jesus in the ground. He didn’t make them understand through some kind of direct infusion of mystical knowledge. Instead He set a sign that could be easily missed had no one been looking. Maybe this was a more prominent and bright sign in the sky that everyone noticed, but still God didn’t reveal the significance of this sign broadly. Instead He revealed Himself only to those who would receive His specific sign and understand its significance.

There are a couple things that we should take away from the Biblical narrative. First,

there is a disposition of individuals that prepares them to receive the Truth of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit uniquely upon each individual. I suspect that most people alive when Christ was born did not care to notice the star, and of those who did, only a few understood its meaning. Of those who understood, which ones made the preparations and exerted the effort to see the new-born king for themselves? For “Narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

This certainly represents a principle that can be generalized. Jesus does not reveal Himself cheaply to any. It is an immeasurably valuable prize and the highest privilege to be close to Christ. No one is barred from Him, but Jesus will not be abused by those who care nothing for Him. Christ has come; Christ has died; Christ has risen; and Christ has ascended, all of this so that we could be reconciled to God and welcomed in His presence. But now we must gather our provisions and make the arduous journey to the cradle for ourselves. He does not leave us without a guide. The star leads us ever onward. But the journey is ours. He who will not endeavor the heat of the desert day and the bitter wilderness nights, will remain far off.

The second thing we must notice from the story of the wise men is that they followed a star – a sign that pointed to God. They did not apprehend Him directly. God used an agent to lead them. Now do we have examples of more immediate divine messages from God? Yes, Mary was directly told by Gabriel that she would bear the Christ. Joseph was directed twice by God in dreams, first that he should marry Mary and then that he should flee with the Holy Family to Egypt to escape Herod. Even today, we hear many stories of God revealing Himself quite directly in dreams to Muslims who then convert. But it seems this is more rare than common. We are surprised at the stories we hear coming out of the Middle East because that is not generally our experience. But even in these stories, new converts from Islam must seek out fellowship and be further disciplined. They need guides. God uses other agents to lead us closer to Him.

First and foremost among these agents is the Church. The Church is the star of Bethlehem that keeps us trekking in the right direction. The Church is the ark that carries us through the flood of this life to bring us safely to our eternal home. The Church is our lifeblood, for we are all members of one Body; we need each other, for we will wither and eventually die if we cut ourselves off from the Body of Christ. Our faith is established and maintained through the grace of God as given through the Church.

Within the Church though, we also have each other as agents of salvation. We are, each of us, missionaries to the world. It is as if we are each a star that leads to God. We are heavenly signs to those who are alienated from Christ, and we help to lead and guide those who are searching for Him. You are a star of Bethlehem. God uses you to lead the world to the house of bread, to the heavenly manna, the Body and the Blood of Christ which feeds our souls and nourishes our spirits.

In today's epistle reading from the letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul highlights this sense. He begins by reinforcing the mystery which has been revealed by God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, that salvation is not only for the Jews; rather the Jews were raised up by God so that the Messiah of the World, of the Jews and the Gentiles, would be born. Salvation is for all humanity, for any who would believe and be baptized into the Church. The Apostle says, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ." Paul claims to be the least of the saints, but God used the least one to spread the Truth of Christ and to profoundly and permanently change the course of the Church.

Now even though we're not St. Pauls – obviously – let us reject any sense that we cannot have a profound impact on growing the Church, on leading those who are afar off to God. Will we submit to how God chooses to deploy us? And how committed will we be to giving our all for God, to radically obeying Him instead of fearing man? The challenge for us then is to receive God's grace as St. Paul did and then to project it into the world. The fire of God's love and grace must burn within us if we would shine out as a light into the dark night of this broken world.

Today we embark upon our Epiphany journey. May we be sensitive to the signs that God gives us, and then may we undertake the arduous journey to follow the signs, to be closer to Christ, so that the fire of His love would burn more brightly within us, so that He would more greatly use us.

God grant this grace to us, and we give Him all the glory.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.