



EPIPHANY

Sunday, January 8, 2012

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The unit you are viewing, Epiphany, is a compact unit. This means that it is not a complete commentary of the Scripture(s) selected for this day on the calendar, nor does it have a full, supporting cultural resource unit and worship unit. Instead, to enliven the imagination of preachers and teachers, we have provided a sermonic outline, songs, suggested books, and suggested articles, links, and videos. For additional information see Epiphany in the archives of the Lectionary for 2008 (coupled with Holy Communion), 2009 (coupled with Baptism), and in 2011 (coupled with Holy Communion). 2011 was the first year that the African American Lectionary posted compact units for moments on its liturgical calendar.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

During Epiphany, we get a variety of snapshots of the Savior's brilliant glory. The Greek word *epiphaneia* means to manifest, show forth, or make clear. By that definition, the early Church meant the revealing of Christ to the Gentile world. And the first Gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as the "king of the Jews" were the Magi (wise men). Epiphany celebrates the arrival of the Magi to visit Jesus, but the day has been overshadowed by Christmas. Epiphany is observed on January 6, and the time in between Christmas Day and Epiphany is called the "12 days of Christmas."

While most images show the shepherds and wise men worshipping Jesus together in a stable, it is more likely that the Magi arrived as much as two years later, when Joseph and Mary had no doubt found other lodging. For dating the visit of the Magi, remember that they did not leave their home country—Persia (Iraq today)—until they saw a star, and their only means of travel would have been camels, donkeys, or horses. In addition, it is significant that after the wise men visited Herod, Herod ordered the slaughter of all male infants in and around Bethlehem, *two years old* and younger.

As found in Matthew's Gospel exclusively, in this account of the magi story, Jesus is revealed as ruler, beloved of God, observant Jew, obedient son, wonder worker, prophet, teacher, iconoclast, and yet companion of the law and the prophets. These names for Jesus are validated by wise men, a star, John the Baptist, the descending dove, the voice of God, and Elijah and Moses. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed. During the season of Christmas, Jesus is revealed to Jewish parents, Jewish shepherds, and Jewish elders in the temple. At the festival of Epiphany, however, the sphere widens: wise men from the *East* travel to honor the king who has been born, whose star has appeared in the night sky.

The passage from Ephesians, which was read at the feast, quotes the apostle Paul as saying, "The Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus" (3:6). This is why the church has often viewed the days around Epiphany as a time to focus on outreach, mission, and evangelism.

For people of African descent, the story of the magi who were foreigners, visiting Jesus is early indication of a Savior whose life would always place him in touch with those beyond an accepted tribe—whether it was his family, those in his socioeconomic class, his religion, or even his nation of birth. This Savior appeals to those who have been locked out and left out because of being born in certain families, places, and social groups.

Also, the gifts of the magi were unlikely gifts from uncommon sources. Gifts often reveal a great deal about the giver and so it is here. The first remarkable thing we notice is that it was dark-skinned people who first came to worship the Christ child. The identity of the visitors from the East is a bit of a historical mystery, but they certainly were not blond, blue-eyed Nordic types. Nor did the visitors find the one they sought among the powerful or even the comfortable. This one sent to reveal God to the nations comes by way of an oppressed people as is greeted by foreigners. For people of African descent here is the message of Epiphany: light shines not only in darkness, but God acts through the unlikely to touch the lives of the excluded.

The Season of Epiphany is celebrated mostly in liturgical contexts. But even in the city of New Orleans, where many Catholics who are people of African descent reside, there is an annual Epiphany party. An Epiphany party begins on the “Twelfth Night” (the evening before Epiphany) and continues throughout the season, culminating in Mardi Gras revelry. The “king’s cake” is central to these festivities. A dried lima bean (or more often, a tiny plastic figure of an infant) is baked within the cake. Whoever finds the bean reminiscent of the magi is crowned and robed “king,” and then there are games and pageantry. The parties are enjoyed by the young and old.

An Epiphany party or other community celebration for persons of African descent during the season after Epiphany, still commemorating the journey, might have a multicultural or ecumenical focus. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity falls within this season (January 18 through January 25), as does the commemoration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday (January 15, with the national holiday being celebrated the third Monday in January). Congregations of African descent may hold an international potluck supper, asking members to bring dishes native to their origins or a place they have visited. There is a connection found in the magi’s gifts brought to Jesus from unique places of origin as mentioned in Isaiah 60:6 which speaks of camels coming from Midian, Ephah, and Sheba—all unique places of origin. The three gifts presented to the Christ child in Matthew 2:11 (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) may also have led to the tradition of unique delicacies in the international potluck supper.

Further, the Season of Epiphany reminds us that Christ made his home among us; this should make us mindful of those without homes. God’s enriching grace and empowering strength during this season reminds us that we are witnesses like the magi to the Epiphany star. Following the theme of hospitality that is resonant in the story of the magi and in Paul’s writings in Ephesians 3, we are to invite others to come and see the one who has revealed the plan of God for us and the world.

II. Epiphany: Sermonic Outline

A. Sermonic Focus Text(s): Matthew 2:1-12 and Ephesians 3:1-12 (New Revised Standard Version)

Matthew 2:1-12

(v. 1) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, (v. 2) 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.’(v. 3) When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; (v. 4) and calling together the entire chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. (v. 5) They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: (v. 6) “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.” (v. 7) Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. (v. 8) 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.’ (v. 9) 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. (v. 10) When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (v. 11) 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. (v. 12) And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Ephesians 3:1-12

(v. 1) This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— (v. 2) for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given to me for you, (v. 3) and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, (v. 4) a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. (v. 5) 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: (v. 6) that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. (v. 7) Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power. (v. 8) 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, (v. 9) and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; (v. 10) 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. (v. 11) This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, (v. 12) in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

B. Possible Titles

- i. Invitations from the Magi
- ii. Seekers of the Light
- iii. Following a Star and Finding a Shack

C. Point of Exegetical Inquiry

During the Christmas season, Epiphany continues to show us more of the gift than we may have noticed as we tore off wrapping paper. The message of God’s revelation to a world hungry for new life remains a vital one for today’s world since this season presents difficult issues as well. For so many, especially persons who are black and brown, troubling cultural biases continue. The texts require exploration of such issues.

Additionally, as these texts are exegeted, linking Epiphany to the turn of the seasons and the annual lengthening of days can be an effective metaphor. Even in societies or communities that

do not pay much attention to the cycle of planting and harvesting, the increase of daylight remains a significant change. Science increasingly has identified shorter days with depression and other emotional stresses, so the coming of light does indeed in profound ways involve the coming of life. Although the lengthening of seasons can be an effective metaphor, we need to be cautious about linking God's revelation with changing seasons. While most of us may belong to churches in the Northern Hemisphere, for half of the world Epiphany marks the height of summer. Thinking of this season only in terms of more light betrays our rootedness in a northern culture.

A more disturbing aspect of the imagery of this season, however, is its emphasis on light as the symbol of God, breaking into a world of darkness in need of cleansing and renewal. The danger is that, again, a northern cultural bias will determine our theology. Equating God with all things light, and evil with all things dark, confirms and perpetuates a profound stereotyping of which we need to be suspicious.

III. Introduction

Today we are celebrating the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ, what used to be subtitled the "Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles." The Feast of the Epiphany is one of the oldest feasts and possibly one of the least understood. As Dr. Elvin Parker wrote in the compact unit for Epiphany in 2011, "In the Classical sense an epiphany, a concept derived from the ancient Greek word *ἐπιφάνεια* (*epiphaneia*), meaning a "manifestation" or "striking appearance," is the sudden realization, understanding, or comprehension of the larger essence or meaning of something. This term is often used in either a philosophical or a literal sense to signify that the claimant has "found the last piece of the puzzle and now sees the whole picture." It is indicative of new information or a new experience, often insignificant by itself, that illuminates a deeper numinous foundational frame of reference. "The Epiphany Juncture is the place where a luminous light is cast upon deep darkness and that which was enigmatic is now startlingly clear." Because the Magi were Gentiles, not Jews, western Epiphany celebrates the manifestation or the revelation of Christ to the whole world. It celebrates God's "showing up among us" in the person of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. As Star-gazers from the East followed a star and found light in stable-like conditions (or what we today might call shacks or ghetto-like conditions), we know that wherever we are in the world, regardless of our economic or social condition, God has shown up for us too. Thank God, we have been given the ultimate light.

IV. Moves/Points

Move/Point One – Seekers of the Light recognize God in the shacks of life.

The context and location of the baby Jesus was not what was expected of the King of Kings. Despite this reality, the magi came to worship and worship they did. They saw God in that stable-shack; they saw God in Jesus.

- a. Our present situation does not preclude our hope of redemption;
- b. When life shatters your dreams, first, find the Lord; and

c. When your star leads you into a shack, look for God, who will be there in the midst.

Move/Point Two – Seekers of the Light bless Christ with our gifts.

- a. We bless him in our worship;
- b. We bless him with kingdom work; and
- c. We bless him through our witness.

Move/Point Three – Seekers of the Light receive God’s grace in the shacks of life.

- a. Receive God’s saving grace;
- b. Experience sustaining grace; and
- c. God offers salvation and promises redemption!

V. Celebration

Have you ever been following a star and wound up in a shack-like situation, surrounded by the debris of injustice, the debris of unemployment, the debris of being the last hired and the first fired? Despite our circumstances in this season, this Epiphany Sunday we have been given the light through God’s grace. Just as light, by its very nature, cannot be contained, but is ever seeking to impart itself, streaming through every crack and crevice, so daily is God revealing himself in all of the spaces of our life.

God’s revelation might be a little disconcerting for us, but that is the nature of God’s grace. When we look for order, for connection, for logic, God surprises us and pulls the rug from under our feet because God through Christ is the light that takes us away from the routine way of life. The logical course for the Wise Men would have been to stay put in Persia; but God’s course took them on a difficult journey to the tiny country of Israel. The logical course would be to find a child king in a palace, but they were led to find the child in a stable in Bethlehem.

This shows as Paul declares that “God’s grace is sufficient.” God’s grace I tell you is for ‘who-so-ever’ . . . and under what-so-ever circumstances. There are no long ‘waiting lines,’ and nobody is turned away. No references are needed, and no résumé is required. God’s grace will transform our tears into triumphs, gloom into glory, weakness into strength, barrenness into fruitfulness, rocks into roses, worries (like those the Magi had on their long journey) into worship, and our heartaches into hallelujahs. Because of this we are glad because we have been given the light through God’s grace. Christ is not just a dim glow, or a signal, or a guide through the darkness, or a light shining on a question, or a ray in a dark world; he is the light that shineth in us.

As seekers of this light, we declare that the Christ child is the radiating, life-sustaining light that comes in power and glory like the sun bursting over the eastern horizon. He is the Sun of Righteousness with healing in its wings. We celebrate the good news that Jesus Christ is the light of the world because he reveals the very heart of God. That is what we are proclaiming in the Nicene Creed when we confess Christ as “Light of Light, True God of True God.” Oh beloved brothers and sisters, I declare that he is the light! We affirm that he is the light through our worship, our work, and our witness as we let our lights shine over all the land.

VI. Illustrations

He moved into the ward with us.

Dr. John Rosen, a psychiatrist in New York City, is well known for his work with catatonic schizophrenics. Normally doctors remain separate and aloof from their patients. Dr. Rosen moves into the ward with them. He places his bed among their beds. He lives the life they must live. Day-to-day, he shares it. He loves them. If they don’t talk, he doesn’t talk either. It is as if he understands what is happening. His being there, being with them, communicates something that they haven’t experienced in years—somebody understands.

But then he does something else. He puts his arms around them and hugs them. He holds these unattractive, unlovable, sometimes incontinent persons, and loves them back into life. Often, the first words they speak are simply, “Thank you.”

This is what the Christ did for us at Christmas. He moved into the ward with us. He placed his bed among our beds. Those who were there, those who saw him, touched him and were in turn touched by him and restored to life. The first word they had to say was “thank you.” Christmas is our time to say “Thank you.”

—Mark Berg, *Seasonal Illustrations*, Resource, 1992, p. 21

Light

The Sun is a light twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. All year long, all decade long, all century long, the sun just keeps on shining. The problem, however, is that the earth gets dark. How can there be all that light and the earth still gets dark? It’s because the earth turns. The earth gets dark because the earth is spinning on its axis. Therefore the side that faces the sun gets light and the side that is facing away does not.

If there is darkness in your life, it’s not because God, the Father of Lights, is turning; it’s because you are turning. He is the Father of Lights and in Him there is no shadow. There is no darkness in Him. Because God is faithful, He’s consistent. Just like the sun, He is always shining and in His light, there is no shifting or moving shadow. We have to make sure we are turned toward Him.

—Tony Evans. Tony Evans' Book of Illustrations: Stories, Quotes, and Anecdotes from More Than 30 Years of Preaching and Public Speaking. Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009

VII. Sounds, Sights, and Colors in These Passages

Matthew 2:1-12

Sounds: Wise men asking the location of the King of the Jews; the wise men worshipping Jesus; Herod fearfully calling together the chief priest and scribes; Herod telling the wise men to go and find the Messiah;

Sights: A rising star; a start stopping over the place where Jesus was born; the wise men offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and

Colors: The colors of the clothing worn by the wise men; the colors in the house where Mary and Jesus were found; the colors of the gifts brought to Jesus by the wise men.

Ephesians 3:1-12

Sounds: Diverse languages; manifestation of God's glory; evangelism and proclamation;

Sights: Bread and wine; laying on of hands; baptism of families and infants; racial and religious tension; praying; consuming fire of tongues; candles; and darkness; and

Colors: Green—the color of the growth; red, yellow, brown, and black—the colors of God's salad bowl of humanity (Gentiles).

VIII. Songs to Accompany This Sermon

A. Well Known Song(s)

- In the Presence of a King. By Donald Lawrence
- The Presence of the Lord Is Here. By Kurt Carr
- What Child Is This? By William Dix. Harm. by John Stainer. Tune, (GREENSLEEVES).

B. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2005–2011)

- Celebrate New Life. By Benjamin Winans
- God Great God. By Kurt Carr

- How Great Is Our God. By Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash

C. Spiritual(s)

- Behold the Star. Negro Spiritual. Arr. by Nolan Williams
- Epiphany. By Gennifer Benjamin Brooks. Music by William S. Moon
- Star-Child. By Shirley Erena Murray. Music by Carlton R. Young
- Shine on Me. Negro Spiritual. Arr. by Jimmie Abbington

D. Liturgical Dance Music

- For Every Mountain. By Kurt Carr
- Holy Spirit We Now Wait on Thee. By Clarence E. McClendon

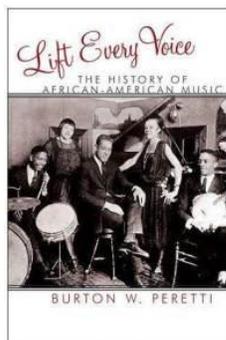
E. Invitational Music

- Jesus, the Light of the World. By George Elderkin; verses by Charles Wesley. Tune, (WE’LL WALK IN THE LIGHT).

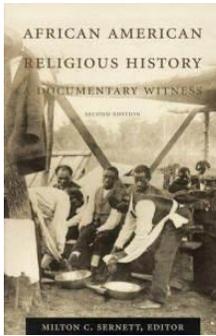
IX. Books to Assist in Preparing Sermons or Bible Studies Related to Epiphany



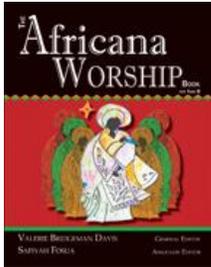
Noel, James A. and Matthew V. Johnson, eds. The Passion of the Lord: African American Reflections. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005.



Peretti, Burton W. Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.



Sernett, Milton C, ed. African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.



Fousa, Safiyah and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds. The Africana Worship Book (Year B/Volume 2). Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources (GBOD), 2008.

X. Videos, Audio, and/or Interactive Media

- “Jesus Is the Light That Shineth in Me.” Performed by the Florida Mass Choir. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9UWIWBwVWw> accessed 29 September 2011.
- “We Are Marching in the Light of God.” St. Augustine’s Gospel Choir performing at the 9/11 Unity Walk September 11, 2011. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVvZnBkTBj4> accessed 29 September 2011
- “Siyahamba.” Sung by the Mwamba Children’s Choir; recorded live at Life Point Church in Westminster, Maryland. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1KZbMprW8U> accessed 29 September 2011
- An informational video on Epiphany. Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCJc-pVxgm8&feature=related> accessed 29 September 2011
- “An Epiphany That Changed a Destiny,” a sermon by Minister Reginald Sharpe, Jr. (Provided by the director of the Lectionary’s Young Ministers’ Corner.) Online location: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tnT2xaCcDA&feature=related> accessed 29 September 2011

X. Links to Helpful Websites for Epiphany

- Reichmann, Ruth M. “History of 3 Kings Day—Epiphany.” Online location: <http://three-kings-day.123holiday.net/> accessed 5 December 2010
- Epiphany celebration ideas for children. Online location: http://www.christiancrafters.com/lesson_Epiphany.html accessed 15 September 2011
- A Collection of Epiphany season worship resources. Online location: <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/listing.html?ocCat=epiphany&submit=submit> accessed 15 September 2011
- Epiphany lesson plans. Online location: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/109452_115820_ENG_HTM.htm accessed 15 September 2011

Disability Awareness Information: This year the African American Lectionary wants all churches to do a better job of including the disabled/differently abled. Please consider the following when planning, during all worship services, and all other church activities:

We need to give people with disabilities access to society’s most important place: our compassionate hearts. In fact, if we each begin with opening our hearts, access to our church buildings, programs and our lives will be a natural expression of welcoming all God’s children into the community of Christ’s body, freely and without prejudice. Our proactive inclusion of adults and children with disabilities into the full life of our churches then will become the living and best example of being like Christ.

Taken from The Episcopal Disability Network. Online location: <http://www.disability99.org/id69.html> accessed 7 December 2010

XII. Notes for Select Songs

A. Well Known Song(s)

- In the Presence of a King. By Donald Lawrence
Location:
Restoring The Years. Brentwood, TN: EMI Gospel, 2003.
- The Presence of the Lord Is Here. By Kurt Carr
Location:
Cage, Byron. Live at New Birth Cathedral. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 2003.
- What Child Is This? By William Dix. Harm. by John Stainer. Tune, (GREENSLEEVES).

Location:

African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #220

B. Modern Song(s) (Written between 2005–2011)

- Celebrate New Life. By Benjamin Winans
Location:
Bebe & Cece Winans. The Ultimate Collection. Nashville, TN: Sparrow Records, 2007.
- God Great God. By Kurt Carr
Location:
One Church. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 2005.
- How Great Is Our God. By Chris Tomlin, Jesse Reeves, and Ed Cash
Location:
Morton, Paul. Embracing The Next Dimension. Nashville, TN: Compendia, 2007.

C. Spiritual(s)

- Behold the Star. Negro Spiritual. Arr. by Nolan Williams
Location:
African American Heritage Hymnal. #216
- Epiphany. By Gennifer Benjamin Brooks. Music by William S. Moon
Location:
Zion Still Sings for Every Generation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007. #64
- Star-Child. By Shirley Erena Murray. Music by Carlton R. Young
Location:
Zion Still Sings. #63
- Shine on Me. Negro Spiritual. Arr. by Jimmie Abbington
Location:
African American Heritage Hymnal. #527

D. Liturgical Dance Music

- For Every Mountain. By Kurt Carr
Location:

Kurt Carr Singers. No One Else. Inglewood, CA: Gospocentric, 1997.

- Holy Spirit We Now Wait on Thee. By Clarence E. McClendon
Location:
Shout Hallelujah. New York, NY: Integrity, 2000.

E. Invitational Music

- Jesus, the Light of the World. By George Elderkin; verses by Charles Wesley. Tune, (WE'LL WALK IN THE LIGHT).
Location:
African American Heritage Hymnal. #217