

Epiphany
Reading I: Isaiah 60: 1-6
Responsorial Psalm: 72: 1-2, 7-8, 10-11, 12-13
Reading II: Ephesians 3: 2-3a, 5-6
Gospel: Matthew 2: 1-12
Readings may be found on the US Bishop's website:
<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/010823.cfm>



The gospel reading for the Epiphany comes from Matthew with the story of the Magi. Nothing is known for sure about these wise men. There are no historical records. The key points are Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the birth in Bethlehem, and the approximate dating of the birth.

The Magi may have been astrologers, people who gathered information about foreign cultures, or even Jewish scholars from the Mesopotamian region. There is no indication of how many there were. The number three developed from the three gifts that are named and was first discussed around the year 200. (Some medieval paintings depict a few dozen wise men.)

The message of the passage shows the lack of understanding by Herod and the scholars of the law who are consulted. This theme will be repeated as the Gospel of Matthew continues to warn others to be open to God's work even when it does not fit one's current understanding. The scholars draw upon the Prophet Micah (5:1) to identify where the Messiah would come. Bethlehem was the home of the Davidic dynasty. Micah is affirming that God will be faithful to the promises that have been made. While identifying the place, the scholars miss the heart of the message. It is God who will raise a king.

Additionally, the Gospel passage highlights how God's truth is open to those who search, no matter where they begin, either geographically or religiously. Thirdly, the gifts reveal something about the child. Only kings and nobles held gold. Frankincense was used only in the worship of God. Myrrh was used in burials to cover the scent of corpses. The gifts convey parts of the identity of Jesus, who is King, God, and human.

Searching is part of the spiritual journey. Generally, God does not show up and say here I am. God invites and encourages in subtle ways. Interests, desires, experiences, and conversations invite each person to explore, question, and listen. The journey and search of the Magi invite each person to become aware of the guiding stars (interests, desires, experiences, people) that focus one's attention. It encourages us to ask questions of others and to meet people along the way. Lastly, it challenges our assumptions about where one will find the answers.

The Magi embarked on a journey, following a star, to an unknown destination. They followed a hope and desire within their hearts. They sought advice in Jerusalem and consulted with King Herod. In their search for a great king, they did not reject little Bethlehem as an impossible place. They pursued their journey through all the challenges encountered and were not deterred by any obstacles along the way. Thus, they offer guidance and inspiration for all seekers. Hold fast to the movement of God in your life. Do not allow your ego or preconceptions to distract you from your ultimate goal – encountering God.

Take time to reflect on your journey in recent months and look toward the coming months.

Who or what are the stars that you are following?

Whom do you consult for guidance?

What are some of the places to which you have been led?

What gifts will you offer others in the coming months?

What help do you need from God or others to continue your journey?

The first reading is from the third part of Isaiah (56-66), near the time of the return from the Babylonian captivity. The first part imagines the return of the Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. It was God's work that brought them back to Jerusalem. That God had done this great thing will make them a light for the entire world. This work of God will lead the Gentiles to be pilgrims. They will seek God and offer gifts to honor the God of Israel.

These images offer a background to the story of the Magi. Three things influence our understanding of the Magi based on this passage. The idea that they are Gentiles is rooted in the pilgrimage of foreigners coming to Jerusalem. The gold and frankincense gifts are imaged here. Thirdly, the camels who are not mentioned in the New Testament are drawn from this passage.

The second reading from the Letter to the Ephesians declares two important points. God's work of salvation is realized through the coming of Jesus, and it is open to all people. Secondly, Paul was given a calling to make it known. For centuries, the Jewish people had understood that their covenant with God established for them a special relationship with God. The death and resurrection of Jesus extended this relationship to all humanity. The Holy Spirit revealed this to Paul and the Apostles. The Gentiles (non-Jews) are members of the same body and are co-heirs with the Jews to all of God's promises. God's saving of all humanity was hidden and a mystery to people of the earlier centuries. In the presence and ministry of Jesus, it is made real and effective for all people.

Key themes:

Universal gift of salvation
Spiritual Journey
Christians as being light to others

Reflection questions:

How has God's work of salvation become real for you?

What challenges have you encountered in seeing God's work of salvation for particular people?

How does your life, words, or deeds help spread the light of the gospel and God's love to others?

Prayer suggestions:

For the Church: that we may be a Light to those who are searching for direction and help illuminate their path through our words and deeds of compassion and justice

For a spirit of wonder: that our hearts may be awestruck as we recognize God's gifts to us in our faith, our relationships, and our opportunities

For a spirit of hope: that, like the Wise Men, God's Light may guide us into the uncharted future, calm our fears, and help us to trust God's love and care for us

For all who are seekers: that God will lead those who are confused or searching for a new beginning onto a new path that will be filled with meaning, purpose, and wholeness

For catechumens and candidates: that God's light will open a new and deeper relationship with Christ and lead them into fuller participation in the Christian Community