

The Epiphany of Our Lord
January 6, 2018
Matthew 2:1-12

“Shine Bright”

Today is the twelfth and final day of Christmas, and it seems mostly to be forgotten in our culture. For most folks, Christmas was over already on December 26. That Christmas carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” does help us to remember that there are, in fact, twelve days to this season. Does anyone remember what the gift given on the twelfth day of Christmas is? Answer: twelve drummers drumming! Even if this day is not a big deal in our own culture, in many parts of the world, today – the Feast of the Epiphany – is a big deal. Today is the day when gifts are given, not on Christmas. The gift-giving is rooted in the gifts which those wise men brought to honor the Christ Child: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The gifts of love that we give to one another are a reflection of these first gifts from the Christmas story in Scripture. But before those gifts were presented was the star, shining brightly, which led those wise men to Jesus. On this Feast of the Epiphany, “Shine Bright” is the theme for preaching. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Atop many of our Christmas trees is a star, reminding us of that star which guided the wise men to Jesus. The center banner here before us depicts this. One of the beloved Christmas decorations at my home is a large, lighted star of Bethlehem that hangs outside above our front door. Many years ago when my girls were quite small, enroute back from visiting family in Iowa, we stopped in Frankenmuth, Michigan, at Bronner’s Christmas Wonderland. It is the be-all and end-all of all things Christmas. Open year-round, Bronner’s proudly points people to the Christ of Christmas. That star points us to the wisdom of God, and as today’s prayer reminds us, “by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles.” The wise men were the first Gentiles to come and worship Jesus, and we follow in their train. Tradition tells us that there were three, but that is based only on the number of gifts presented. Scripture does not tell us how many there actually were. Tradition also tells us that they came from three different areas of the world: Far East, Middle East, and West (Europe), and that they were of three different ages: youth, prime, and old age. Tradition also tells us that their names were Balthazar, Gaspar, and Melchior. We cannot prove any of this, of course. But what we do know is that these wise men were learned, wealthy, and influential people who came from the royal courts of Persia and Babylon, in what would be today Iraq and Iran. They studied the stars and heavenly bodies, in addition to many other things, as these were believed to influence the course of human affairs. But how did the wise men come to know of this promised King of the Jews? That, too, is uncertain, but it may well be that when God’s people were exiled from Jerusalem and Judea to Babylon beginning in 596 B.C. that the Hebrew Scriptures and the promise of a long-awaited Messiah would have become known to these learned men.

As Dr. Paul Maier writes in his book, *First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), still available on Amazon (<https://www.amazon.com/First-Christmas-True-Unfamiliar-Story/dp/0825439159>): “It happens that the Chinese have more exact and more complete astronomical records than the Near East... In 1871, John Williams published his authoritative list of comets derived from Chinese annals. Now, Comet No. 52 on the Williams list may have special significance for the first Christmas. It appeared for some seventy days in March-April of 5 B.C. near the constellation of Capricorn, and would have been visible in both the Far and Near East. As each night wore on, of course, the comet would seem to have moved westward across the south sky. The time is also very appropriate. This could indeed have been the wise men’s astral marker... It is quite fascinating to note that Comet No. 53 on the Williams list (next after the above) is such a tailless comet, which could well have been a nova, as Williams admitted. No. 53 appeared in March-April of 4 B.C. – a year after its predecessor – in the area of the constellation of Aquila, which also was visible all over the East. Was this,

perhaps, the star that reappeared to the Magi once Herod directed them to Bethlehem (Mt. 2:9)? The following, then, is a possible astronomical reconstruction of what happened that first Christmas. The remarkable conjunctions of Jupiter [the King planet] and Saturn [shield or defender of Palestine] in 7-6 B.C. alerted the Magi to important developments in Palestine, for the astrological significance closely paralleled what they had learned from Hebrew lore about a star heralding the expected Messiah [Numbers 24:17]. The comet of 5 B.C. (Williams No. 52) dramatically underscored this interpretation and sent them on their way, while it was the nova (or comet) of 4 B.C. (Williams No. 53) which appeared after they had reached Jerusalem and were seeking further information from Herod” (pp. 76, 80). Amazing! Surely this is the hand of the Lord!

As brightly as that star once shone to guide the wise men with their exotic gifts, even more brightly does the light and love of Jesus shine. That light and love would shine not only from his infant crib but even to the cross of Calvary where He would give his life for our sins. That light and love cannot be extinguished, as John’s Gospel tells us: **“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it”** (John 1:5). And that light and love shine forth from Jesus into your life and mine. We are his light-bearers in a world where love has grown cold and light often seems overshadowed by darkness, despair, and death. The closing words from today’s Gospel lesson tell us: **“and they [the wise men] departed to their own country by another way”** (Matthew 2:12). Certainly this speaks of the physical route which they took home, but perhaps those wise men were entirely changed – transformed – by their encounter with Jesus. And so they really did return home “by another way,” a new way of living. They would never be the same. Shine bright, people of God! Shine bright with the light and love of Jesus. Shine bright with his grace and mercy through your words and deeds. Shine bright, now at the beginning of this New Year and every day. Shine bright! Jesus Christ is the Light of the world. Amen.