

# A Look Behind the Scriptures

Epiphany of the Lord, January 8, 2012



## Reading I Isaiah 60:1-6

An epiphany manifests something previously hidden. Today's solemnity celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the nations, but it is only the first of other "epiphanies" that will manifest the divinity of Jesus. The Church also celebrates Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan and his changing water into wine at Cana as manifestations of the divine made human in Christ. Isaiah's joyful prophecy announces to Jerusalem that her time of exile will come to an end and that a new and glorious day of hope, light, and victory has dawned. In the midst of darkness and murky clouds, says Isaiah, a light has begun shining- and the light shines directly upon those who had been cowering in fear. The manifestation of God in our lives can both terrify and relieve us. If we've spent enough time in the darkness of fear, it takes courage to look at the light. Its blinding radiance frightens us. But if we open our eyes and look, fear can disappear as quickly as the shadow that helped create it. Isaiah calls the people of Israel to open their eyes and see what God is doing for them. He calls them to believe in the impossible – that their hearts will "throb and overflow"; that their children will be carried to Israel by the Gentiles in whose lands they had been exiled; that within the land of Israel, foreigners will sing the praises of Israel's God. On this day Isaiah's words have special meaning for us. We are being roused from sleep to hear God's message of hope. We, too, can expect the unexpected and see in the darkness. God has taken human flesh; the impossible has been made possible, and there is nothing God cannot do.

## Reading II Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6

The ancient solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord celebrates the manifestation of God in Christ and the extension of God's saving love to all people. This revelation of God's saving action is not just a past event we gather to remember, but a present and ongoing reality the Church is charged to announce. Paul says the universal availability of salvation was part of God's secret plan, unknown in former ages but now revealed by the Spirit. This is a startling revelation. The very strangers Israel feared are made family members. Those considered "other" have become part of "us". God planned this from the start. While we thought ourselves different and special, Paul says, God was planning a family so big no one could count it. God has made Jew and Gentile coheirs – not only member of the same family, but "members of the same body!" If all can become "copartners in the promise...through the *gospel*," as Ephesians states, then sharing the Gospel takes on new urgency. The life of the Church and of every Christian is an epiphany – a manifestation of the saving Lord in our midst yesterday, today, and everyday. Paul received this knowledge as a direct "revelation" from God. He shares it boldly with people reluctant to embrace that truth. Now, you must boldly proclaim that the living Christ came to sanctify and save *all* people.

## Gospel Matthew 2:1-12

As he does throughout his Gospel, Matthew quotes the prophets to demonstrate that Jesus is the fulfillment of prophecy and the object of divine intervention. This story speaks of more than Gentile kings worshipping a child. It speaks of effort and quest, of signs observed and followed, of risk and danger, deception and narrow escape; and it says that through all these a child became the revelation of God to the world. Ironically, it is foreigners who strive and seek and find; who open treasures and offer gifts, and who go forth to distant lands announcing the good news of God among us. But then, the details of Matthew's story differ strikingly from the angels and shepherds we typically associate with Jesus' birth. Threat immediately enters this story, for while shepherds rejoice at the announcement of the Savior's birth, Herod "and all Jerusalem" are "greatly troubled." The magi come to the capital and its palace seeking the newborn king, only to learn his birth was prophesied to occur in a humble village. Herod lets the foreigners go to seek him, while he plots the demise of the potential rival. Although many of Matthew's words offer comforting familiarity ("magi," "Bethlehem," "east," "star," "child," "shepherd," "gold, frankincense, and myrrh," other words disturb because they are unexpected ("King Herod," "house," "prostrated"). We anticipate kneeling, not prostrated, magi who enter a *stable* not a *house*' Herod should loom over the end of Jesus' life, not its beginning. Herod's presence gives a sense of impending danger. His deceit and plotting portend the threat that will haunt Jesus all his days; they foreshadow his Passion.

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