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Sermon Notes

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Epiphany: Christ Manifests Himself

Matthew 2:1-12

The focus of our time this morning is a mysterious word—epiphany—and what it means for us today

I. What is “Epiphany”?

A. Traditional Date: January 6

1. We are not Liturgy or “Church Calendar” people
2. I was raised Roman Catholic... various feasts
3. Feast of Epiphany follows Twelve-Day Feast of Christmas
4. Usually starts January 6 and runs for eight days
5. Biblical focal event: the visit of the Magi to the baby Jesus

B. Definition of the Word

1. From Greek roots... “to manifest” “to show” “to display”
2. Greek concept: to sudden unveiling or manifestation of a divine being
3. Literature: an epiphany is a sudden awakening or perception about the true nature of something; an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure

Short story writer William Sidney Porter (pen name O. Henry) loved these kinds of surprises, these kinds of epiphanies in which something precious is discovered:

His most famous is the short story “The Gift of the Magi” in which a poor young couple living in a squalid urban apartment in the 19th century seeks to buy Christmas gifts for each other. They have no money, so each sacrifices something very precious to them—she has her luxurious hair cut and sells it to a wigmaker to earn money for a chain for her beloved husband’s heirloom pocket watch; he sells that same pocket watch to buy some expensive decorative combs for her long, luxurious hair!!

Their epiphany is their love for each other... how much each is willing to sacrifice to express that love

The final lines of the story explain why he called it “The Gift of the Magi”:

The magi, as you know, were wise men--wonderfully wise men--who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. O all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

4. Science:

a. Archimedes, discovering specific gravity

Archimedes' story: a local Greek tyrant named Hiero suspects that his goldsmith cheated him while making a golden crown; he thinks his goldsmith left out some gold and replaced it with silver in a wreath dedicated to the gods; Hiero hires the mathematical genius Archimedes to determine the truth; Archimedes accepts the challenge and begins thinking about the problem; as he makes a subsequent trip to the public baths, he realizes that the more his body sinks into the water, the more water is displaced; thus the displaced water is an exact measure of his volume.

Because gold weighs more than silver, he reasons that a crown mixed with silver would have to be bulkier to reach the same weight as one composed only of gold; therefore it would displace more water than its pure gold counterpart. Realizing he has hit upon a solution, the young Greek math whiz leaps out of the bath and rushes home crying "Eureka! Eureka!" Or, translated: "I've found it! I've found it!"

b. Isaac Newton, discovering gravity: sitting under the apple tree, an apple falls and Newton begins considering the law of gravity

c. Einstein studying a compass

When Albert was 5 years old and sick in bed, his father, Hermann Einstein, brought Albert a device that stirred his intellect. It was the first time he had seen a magnetic compass. He lay there shaking and twisting the odd contraption, certain he could fool it into pointing off in a new direction. But try as he might, the compass needle would always find its way back to pointing in the direction of magnetic north. "A wonder," he thought. The invisible force that guided the compass needle was evidence to Albert that there was more to our world that meets the eye. There was "something behind things, something deeply hidden."

So began Albert Einstein's journey down a road of exploration that he would follow the rest of his life. "I have no special gift," he would say, "I am only passionately curious."

The History of Science has been filled with moments like this... epiphanies of natural law

C. Basic Concept Here

1. The true epiphany

- a. not anything we discover about ourselves... good or bad
- b. not anything we discover about this physical universe
- c. not anything we discover about history or literature
- d. the true epiphany is what Christ MANIFESTS about Himself... what He discloses about Himself

2. Christ is an infinite being

- a. Infinite as the Second Person of the Trinity... eternally begotten of the Father

“God from God, Light from Light, very God from very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father...”

- b. The Ancient of Days... living eternally in fellowship with God the Father
- c. Through Christ the Father created all things—things in heaven and things on earth
- d. Not a person here in this room fully knows Christ

3. It will take an eternity of epiphanies for us to learn who Christ really is

Philippians 3:10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death

4. The central business of our lives... to know Christ, to know Him truly and fully

John 17:3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

5. This morning, we're going to see a series of epiphanies... of Christ revealing Himself to us by the word

II. Christ Manifested to the Magi

A. Account Given in Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" ⁷ ¶ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

B. Who Were the Magi?

1. Many popular considerations of these men

“We Three Kings of Orient Are... bearing gifts we traverse afar... field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star”

The idea that they are three kings goes beyond the biblical account... but it has taken root nonetheless

In the Western Christian church they have been commonly known since the 8th century as Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. These derive from an early 6th century Greek manuscript in Alexandria

2. Marvin Vincent “Word Studies in the New Testament”

“Many absurd traditions and guesses respecting these visitors to our Lord’s cradle have found their way into popular belief and into Christian art. They were said to be kings, and three in number; they were said to be representatives of the three families of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and therefore one of them is pictured as an Ethiopian; their names are given as Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, and their three skulls, said to have been discovered in the twelfth century by Bishop Reinald of Cologne, are exhibited in a priceless casket in the great cathedral of that city.”

The reliquary in the Cathedral of Cologne

the most celebrated work of art in the cathedral is the **Sarcophagus of the Magi**, a large gilded sarcophagus dating to around 1200. The largest reliquary in the western world, the exterior is seven feet of gilded silver and jewels. Images of Old Testament prophets line the bottom and the 12 apostles decorate the top. Inside, the reliquary holds three golden-crowned skulls believed to belong to the Three Magi.

These relics were acquired by Cologne in the 12th century and put the city on the pilgrimage map. Cologne Cathedral is still an important stop for modern pilgrims. The Three Magi do not play a large role in the life of Jesus, but they are honored for being the first pilgrims. Their precedent inspired medieval pilgrims to travel far to worship Jesus.

3. Magi in the Old Testament World

- a. Greek historian Herodotus... magi were a priestly caste from the Medes; the Medes lived in the land we know today as Iran
- b. Very active throughout the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, especially in Babylon throughout the whole Old Testament era
- c. Originally priests in the early form of the Zoroastrian religion that flourished in that part of the world
- d. They had an altar on which burned a perpetual flame they believed had originally come down from heaven; on it they offered blood sacrifices
- e. Zoroastrianism had become the official religion of Persia in the 6th century B.C.
- f. It is still practiced today by the Parsees, Iranian refugees who fled the Muslim persecutions in the 7th century AD
- g. The magi's religion is monotheistic and bears some similarities to Judaism; however, it has deep roots in the occult; magi used demonic practices such as sorcery, astrology, wizardry, divination of dreams, communication with the dead and other occultic practices strictly forbidden in the Bible
 - i) The words "magic" and "magician" come from the magi
- h. In the Babylonian kingdom, Magis were extremely influential in Nebuchadnezzar's court; they figure prominently in the book of Daniel; they were counselors to the Emperor... thus we get the word "magistrate" also from them
- i. Magis had a special skill in interpreting dreams

- j. Daniel 2: Nebuchadnezzar had a fearsome dream, and demanded that the magis in his court tell him the dream to prove their ability to interpret it; after spending the night praying, Daniel was able to do that
- k. Remember that Nebuchadnezzar's dream centered on a kingdom that God would send that would last forever:

Daniel 2:44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.

- l. Remember also that Daniel was established as chief of the magis and counselors to the king
 - m. It is utterly predictable that Daniel would have used his influence to instruct the magi on the truths of Scripture and the prophecies concerning the Christ, the coming King of the Jews
4. Magis in the time of Christ

- a. They appear at the court of King Herod and make an astonishing request

Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

- b. At this time, magis would still have had enormous influence throughout the Middle East
- c. Rome was fearful of power coming from the east; every other world empire of that time had been oriented east—the Babylonian, the Medo-Persian, and the Greek empires had all stretched eastward toward India; Alexander the Great had conquered as far as the Indus River in modern India; but Rome however was focused westward... the Mediterranean Sea and northward toward Europe and Britain; while Rome was conquering these lands, the Parthian Empire was growing in the east... Rome never conquered the Parthians, and they considered them the greatest threat in the east
- d. The magi had tremendous influence in the Parthian Empire... the magi were particularly influential in selecting kings of Parthia

5. Magis in the court of Herod

- a. Thus when the magi appeared in Herod's court, he was deeply disturbed and troubled

Matthew 2:3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

- b. His deepest fear was that a usurper king would rise up to supplant him; but he must also have been disturbed to see the Magi at all

MacArthur: “When magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, Herod was understandably troubled. He knew these men were kingmakers, and they were going about town asking for the One who had been born king of the Jews! Try to imagine the scene. These men arrived in Jerusalem no doubt with a great deal of pomp and show. Their typical costume would have included long, cone-shaped hats like those we associate with wizards. They would have been riding not on camels, but more likely on Persian steeds or Arabian horses. They might well have been traveling with a small army, since their journey took them into Roman territory. They must have been an imposing sight!

Furthermore, Herod’s own small army was on duty with the census. This was no time for a band of foreign kingmakers to be inquiring about an infant they called the ‘King of the Jews.’”

Herod’s own situation

- c. The politics of the region
 - i) Herod the puppet king of a buffer state between the mighty Roman Empire and the almost as powerful Parthian Empire
 - ii) His land had already been the battleground of several wars between these two mighty world powers
 - iii) So these magi he would have seen as a threat to the stability of the region

Matthew 2:3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

- iv) The word “troubled” means “greatly agitated”... deeply shaken
- v) Amazing how the rulers of the world are so anxious to keep their power!!

6. Herod’s responses

- a. Biblical investigation

Matthew 2:4-6 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of

Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

b. Inquiry of the magi

Matthew 2:7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

c. False motives

Matthew 2:8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Herod was one of the most murderous kings in that region's history

Though successful in politics, Herod was bitterly unhappy in his private life. He married ten wives, including the beautiful Hasmonean princess, Mariamme, the granddaughter of both Hyrcan and Aristobulus. Though he loved her passionately, he suspected her of infidelity and had her executed along with her mother. Later, in 7 BC, he had her two sons killed. Herod kept an uneasy peace by dealing ruthlessly with suspected rivals and troublemakers. He systematically killed off all living claimants to the Hasmonean kingship, including his young brother-in-law, the high priest Aristobulus. When he found that his favorite son, Antipater, had been plotting against him, he had him executed along with two of their brothers - just five days before his own death in 4 BC.

The Roman Emperor Augustus said about Herod: "I would rather be Herod's pig than Herod's son." It is easy to imagine such a man ordering the massacre of all male infants in Bethlehem for no better reason than a vague rumor that one had been born "King of the Jews." This event vividly reflects the pathological character of the king. He murdered members of his own family, yet scrupulously observed Mosaic dietary laws and would eat no pork.

Herod's offer of worship was obviously completely false

But the worship of the Magi was another matter

C. The Worship of the Magi

Matthew 2:9-11 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

1. Christ DISCLOSED HIMSELF to the Magi in many ways

- a. Through the Scripture they had heard in Herod's palace and probably before that, they knew that Christ was born King of the Jews
 - i) That expression was filled with prophetic hope
 - ii) The Jews were a conquered, subject people
 - iii) But like the thief on the cross who said "Remember me when you come in your kingdom", these magi saw beyond the immediate circumstances
 - iv) They were not the kingmakers in this case... they were the king worshipers... recognizing that Jesus had been BORN king of the jews and needed no help from the hand of man
- b. Christ also DISCLOSED Himself by the amazing star that traveled and moved with them
 - i) A star that led them to a specific country, then a specific town in that country, and then a specific place where the Christ-child lay
 - ii) No explanation for the star other than a supernatural manifestation of the power of God... perhaps the shekinah glory of God seen in the Old Testament which moved and led people, like the pillar of fire in the desert... so this star was an EPIPHANY of the power of this baby
 - iii) When they saw the star stop in Bethlehem, right over the house where the baby Jesus was lying, they were OVERJOYED
 - iv) God had revealed the location of the King

2. Proper response: worship

Matthew 2:11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

- a. The epiphany was not complete without seeing the face of the baby
- b. And perhaps their motives in moving out and following the star originally had been political
- c. But when they actually saw the face of Jesus, everything changed
- d. There was nothing left but to prostrate themselves in worship
- e. God had revealed His Son to them, and earthly motives fled away

John 6:44 "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

f. The epiphany of Jesus was a direct revelation to their hearts of the true identity of this baby... the Son of God

D. What is the Significance of their Visit?

1. Their visit was a prophecy of sorts as well
2. Yes, their gifts each had some symbolic significance
 - a. Gold and frankincense typical gifts for a king
 - b. Gold the most precious metal known to man
 - c. Frankincense a costly aromatic fragrance, used in the Levitical sacrifices of worship to God
 - d. Myrrh a curious gift... a natural sedative, offered to Jesus when He died, also used to embalm his body with strips of linen
 - e. All three point to Christ's significance: kingly reign, deity, priestly sacrifice, and death
3. But these Gentiles in their worship also symbolize the day when people from every tribe and language and people and nation will bring their gifts and lay them at Jesus' feet in worship

Isaiah 60:11 Your gates will always stand open, they will never be shut, day or night, so that men may bring you the wealth of the nations-- their kings led in triumphal procession.

Revelation 21:23-27 The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. ²⁴ The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵ On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶ The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life

So... this is the EPIPHANY... the revelation of the Christ-infant to these long-traveling magi from the east

Christ was revealed to them powerfully, and all they could do was worship

But the epiphanies were just beginning

III. Christ Manifested to the Jews by His Life

A. The Apostle John's Statement

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

“We have seen his glory...”

Jesus' life in the Body was a clear epiphany to the Jews of His identity

1 John 1:2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

Same root word in the Greek... APPEARED!!

Jesus life in the Body was a perfect display of holiness

He lived a perfect life of obedience to the Laws of Moses

B. John the Baptist's Testimony

John 1:31-34 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel." ³² Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. ³³ I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' ³⁴ I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God."

C. The Miracles of Jesus

1. After changing the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, John's statement about the effect of that miracle

John 2:11 This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.

2. Every miracle was done as an epiphany... a revealing... a disclosure of the true nature of Jesus as the Son of God

John 20:30-31 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name

D. Peter's Confession

Matthew 16:16-17 *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*

E. Revealed by His Resurrection from the Dead

Romans 1:4 *who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.*

IV. Christ Manifested to Individuals by the Gospel

A. As the Gospel is Preached, Christ is Revealed

Romans 16:25-27 *Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him-- ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen*

1. Simply put, as the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, lost people see for the first time the glories of Christ
2. The words of the gospel have the POWER of God for salvation as Christ is being revealed

B. Clear Proclamation of the Gospel is a Constant Epiphany (Manifestation) of Christ

Paul speaks to Timothy of the grace of God which saves us...

2 Timothy 1:9-11 *grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, ¹⁰ and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, ¹¹ for which I was appointed a preacher and apostle and teacher*

C. As We Preach Christ Crucified and Risen, We are Putting Christ on Display

D. That Vision Saves Souls!!!

E. Epiphanies All Over the Earth

V. Christ Manifested to Believers by the Spirit

A. Simply Put... the More You Obey Christ, the More of Himself He Will Disclose to You

John 14:21 Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."

The word "manifest" is the same as "epiphany"... a newer, deeper revelation of Christ

B. Daily Life a Series of Epiphanies for the Obedient Christian

1. The idea is simple and life-changing
2. Every day, the commands of Christ stand over you and beckon you upward
3. The more you obey by faith, the more of Himself He will disclose to you
 - a. If He commands you to give some money away to missions and you obey, He will disclose more of His heart for the nations to you; if you refuse, He won't
 - b. If He commands you to share your faith with a co-worker and you overcome your fears and do it, He will disclose more of Himself to you; if you don't, He won't
 - c. If He commands you to seek His face in prayer, even with fasting, to focus your heart on Him and you obey, He will give you a new epiphany... a new revelation of Himself to your heart; if you disobey, He will not disclose Himself in that way to you
4. The reward standing over our obedience is greater and greater revelation of Christ to our hearts... a series of epiphanies

Matthew 11:29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

The yoke represents submission to His kingly authority... Christ is saying "The more you come to me and submit to my rule in your life, the more I will disclose of myself to you

APPLICATION:

Learn Christ's commands... **whoever HAS MY COMMANDS**

Study the word constantly to find out His will... memorize the Scripture... your quest for Christ is not as the Magi's was... a physical journey to Bethlehem where you would have a visible epiphany of light, looking at the face of a newborn infant; rather it is a journey of the mind and heart in the pages of Scripture

OBEY WHAT YOU LEARN: everyday, read the Scriptures until you find something to obey, then obey it!! Pray, ask the Lord to show you some way He wants you to obey Him... perhaps in your marriage, perhaps in sexual purity, perhaps in generosity to the poor and needy, perhaps in your prayer life, perhaps in the way you are behaving at work

OBEY WHAT HE COMMANDS... and I believe the more difficult the obedience, the more of Himself Christ will manifest to you... the greater your EPIPHANY

A journey of obedience to learn Christ

C. A Lifetime Quest... Even the Apostle Paul Never Grew Weary of It!!!

Philippians 3:10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death

VI. Christ Manifested to the World by His Return

A. The Exact Word “Epiphany” Used to Refer to His Second Coming in Glory

Titus 2:13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ

1 Timothy 6:14 to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ

2 Timothy 4:8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

B. That will be the Ultimate Epiphany of Christ... to the WHOLE WORLD

Revelation 1:7 Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

VII. Christ Manifested in Eternity

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

A. One Final Word: Christ will NEVER Run Out of Ways to Disclose Himself to Us

1. Isaiah’s prophecy speaks of an increase that NEVER ENDS
2. Forever and ever Christ’s government will increase
3. The word “government” = Kingdom... the Kingdom of Christ will expand forever and ever

4. How can that be? In the hearts and minds of the glorified saints in the New Heavens and the New Earth, as they continually learn how great and majestic and glorious is Christ, the Kingdom will keep INCREASING FOREVER
 5. An ETERNITY of EPIPHANIES...
- B. He Is an Infinite Being... and it will Take an Infinity of Time to Learn Him