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## Festival of the Epiphany Series C 2019

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**Festival of the Epiphany – January 6** *We get a rare treat this year – the feast of Epiphany falls on Sunday. Enjoy it, it doesn't happen all that often that we actually get to celebrate this day. It only happens when Christmas falls on a Tuesday.*

For many congregations this year will be their first Epiphany service since 2013. That is actually a bit of a shame. This feast deserves much better than that, but it is a victim of the over-hyping of Christmas in the commercial sphere. Epiphany is sometimes referred to as the Gentile Christmas and is in fact the larger celebration in most of the Orthodox communities. But because of the way we celebrate Dec 25 culturally, we often are weary of Christmas by this point. What is more we are into the penitential season of January with its resolutions/vows we are already regretting/breaking and credit card statements showing up in the mail. We probably still are thinking that we will lose those 10 or 20 pounds this year, so there is some hope.

The preacher has a couple of options. As always he can preach one of the lessons. There are strong readings for this day and this could work well. If, however, his parish has not regularly celebrated this day, he may want to preach the festival. Its themes of the inclusion of Gentiles and the revelation of the incarnate Jesus to the world are worthy indeed. Epiphany has some potent missions/evangelism themes within its readings and the festival itself.

The season of the Sundays after Epiphany serves as a bridge between the Christmas and Paschal seasons. It transitions from Christmas to Lent. The basic idea is simple. The Lord who hid himself in Bethlehem's stable did such a good job of it that God must reveal him to us. Starting with Bethlehem's star and the wise men of Epiphany, the readings of this season will move through the Baptism of Jesus, calling disciples, turning of water into wine and other miracles. As the season progresses, we will also see that Jesus' divinity is most clearly seen in the suffering of his cross. This season will then culminate in the final Sunday of Epiphany which is known as Transfiguration in which Jesus is transformed for three of his disciples to see. From here he will set his face resolutely for Jerusalem and the death he will die there. By the end of the season Lenten themes are starting to grow.

The festival of Epiphany, however, is solidly on the Christmas end of things. It celebrates the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem. Because so many of our congregations do not celebrate this day with its own service, the readings have also begun to appear in the pericopes of the Festival and the Sundays after Christmas. So you will have to be careful if you are planning on preaching the readings. You may have already done this last week! Perhaps another good reason to preach the festival.

You also may want to start laying the groundwork on this Sunday for a regular observance of the day. Your congregation, like many, may not be ready for a worship service, especially after the glut of services that often accompany Christmas. But with the passing of New Year's Eve and Day services, perhaps we need to rethink that. My father used to host an Epiphany party at his rural Missouri home. The members of the congregation and anyone who cared to come, could bring their Christmas trees for a big bonfire. They sang some last carols, they stood in the cold on a Midwestern evening around that bonfire, and they heard the story of the wise men who

came following a star. Of course, they also had the elements of a party, something to eat, something to drink, laughter and time together. It wasn't really a worship service, but it had many of the elements of that. Are there other ways to celebrate? I always leave my Christmas lights up and running until the feast of Epiphany. My tree stays up until then. A few years ago a friend gave us a beautiful paper star which we hang in the window for the twelve days of Christmas and to Epiphany. It lights up. What else could we do? I know some folks who have the crèche in their house without wise men in the stable; rather, they are on a shelf some distance away. At their daily devotional time their children move the wise men a little closer, usually by a quite circuitous route.

### **Collect of the Day**

O God, by the leading of a star You made known Your only-begotten Son to the Gentiles. Lead us, who know You by faith, to enjoy in heaven the fullness of Your divine presence; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who live and reigns with You and the Holy spirit, one God, now and forever.

*Notice that the theme of this is the revealing of Jesus, not the wise men and their journey. The point is not that they made a long trip on camels, but that God was revealing Jesus to us Gentiles. I think we mess that up too often.*

*The point of the prayer is that we who know Jesus by faith want to be lead to the fullness of God's divine presence. The preacher of this festival will want to parse out just what is meant by the knowledge of Jesus by faith and what of the fullness are we still expecting. This should not be hard for us, but it may prove to be surprisingly difficult to articulate. This is not really an intellectual knowledge but much more like knowing a friend or a spouse.*

*To know Jesus by faith seems to pull right out of the John 20 story where Thomas won't believe until he touches the hands and side of the Lord. When he does, Jesus praises those who believe without seeing, that would be us. We apparently have an advantage over Thomas, at least in Jesus' eyes. So we know Jesus by faith, but I am not sure that many of us or our people think of it that way or are able to articulate that very well. Faith has become such a nebulous and mushy idea for so many people. We consider it a virtue but don't really understand what it is. I think talking about trust would be a good idea here. I recently read a story about a fellow who had been in email contact with an otherwise unknown man for some time. Out of the blue his phone rang and within a moment or two he realized this was the very fellow he had been emailing. The man never said he was the same man but he knew.*

*Faith is best seen as the relationship established by God in our baptism in which sinners, broken and helpless, are lifted up, carried to life, set upon our feet, and encouraged to take the first halting steps toward heaven's purity. In this relationship, God saves us and we are enlivened by His Holy Spirit. The knowledge of Jesus by faith is the knowledge which the clay has of the potter, it is the knowledge the marble has of the sculptor. Indeed, through faith we become a thing of beauty, but it is a thing which the artist makes, not the clay, not the stone. Too often we imagine that our faith is what is doing something. We think that faith is the active thing, when in*

*fact, faith is the relationship in which God acts. This is why I love infant baptism and this is why I love the imagery of adoption for faith. The infant who is adopted does nothing, yet something profound and beautiful happens that day, the new relationship in which the adoptive parents care for the child, raise it, teach, and nurture that child is the faith relationship. Now, please understand, I do not want my children to stay infants and God does not want us to continue to be the spiritually dead folks we were when he adopted us. But my delight in my son's music is made possible by my funding his lessons, buying his instrument, insisting on his practice, and encouragement.*

*To know Christ in faith is to admit that he is working on me, to be able to point to the places in my life in which his healing, leading, forgiving, and sustaining work is going on. The world will not "see" it; they demand proof. Without touching his hands and side I know that he is at work there.*

*The fullness of the presence of God is nothing less than the beatific vision to which the Church has looked for thousands of years. The saints in heaven enjoy the beatific vision. We get to see God. We see him now by faith, but there we will see him by sight. Our eyes will have to be transformed to pull that off. No sunglasses will suffice to cut that brilliance. But transformed we will delight in Him. The ability to enjoy the fullness of God's presence is dependent upon His great work in our lives, a work which began in our baptism and which he brings to completion on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Does that appeal to you? Or are you happy with where you are at right now? If God came and offered you the chance to be utterly transformed or to be given eternal life here on earth, which would you choose? Epiphany will ask us to consider just how hellish such an eternal life here on this broken world would really be. It plants within us the urge to go, see this Savior, bear our gifts, and worship at his feet forever.*

Isaiah 60:1-6

Arise, shine, for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

<sup>2</sup> For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;

but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will be seen upon you.

<sup>3</sup> And nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your rising.

<sup>4</sup> Lift up your eyes all around, and see;  
they all gather together, they come to you;  
your sons shall come from afar,  
and your daughters shall be carried on the hip.

<sup>5</sup> Then you shall see and be radiant;  
your heart shall thrill and exult,

because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,  
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

<sup>6</sup> A multitude of camels shall cover you,  
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;  
all those from Sheba shall come.

They shall bring gold and frankincense,  
and shall bring good news, the praises of the LORD.

<sup>7</sup> *All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you;  
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;  
they shall come up with acceptance on my altar,  
and I will beautify my beautiful house.*

<sup>8</sup> *Who are these that fly like a cloud,  
and like doves to their windows?*

<sup>9</sup> *For the coastlands shall hope for me,  
the ships of Tarshish first,  
to bring your children from afar,  
their silver and gold with them,  
for the name of the LORD your God,  
and for the Holy One of Israel,  
because he has made you beautiful.*

<sup>10</sup> *Foreigners shall build up your walls,  
and their kings shall minister to you;  
for in my wrath I struck you,  
but in my favor I have had mercy on you.*

<sup>11</sup> *Your gates shall be open continually;  
day and night they shall not be shut,  
that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations,  
with their kings led in procession.*

<sup>12</sup> *For the nation and kingdom  
that will not serve you shall perish;  
those nations shall be utterly laid waste.*

<sup>13</sup> *The glory of Lebanon shall come to you,  
the cypress, the plane, and the pine,  
to beautify the place of my sanctuary,  
and I will make the place of my feet glorious.*

<sup>14</sup> *The sons of those who afflicted you  
shall come bending low to you,  
and all who despised you  
shall bow down at your feet;*

*they shall call you the City of the LORD,  
the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.*

*Isaiah has been a pretty regular attender at Church lately, hasn't he! There is a good reason for that, he is often called the Gospel of the Old Testament. As the Church comes to its highest and most holy days, it often finds the words of Isaiah reverberating in its memory. Thank you Handel and the "Messiah" for some of that. Here Isaiah paints a picture of the great reversal for the people of Judah. Their lands have been ravaged, Isaiah has told them that they will go into exile. All looks gloomy and black. But Isaiah has hope for them. Not only will the exiles return and good things happen, but it will be even more glorious than the days of David and Solomon, the tribute of distant lands will once more flow into Jerusalem but also the praises to God.*

*The glory of God arises in the midst of thick darkness, (vs 2.) the preacher will want to ask what that darkness is. The light breaks that darkness. What darkness do we see, or better said, what darkness prevents us from really seeing? What light do we expect or see? How does it shine in our lives? This will be the proclamation of this sermon. "Look! Here is the Light!"*

*The nations will come to you. Of course Christians see this one already happening. The Christian message preached and the multitude of believers in the world are not Jewish but Gentile. The growth of the Christian Church, the fact that millions of people become a Christian every month, is seen as a testimony to this passage and others which speak of the nations coming. This can be hard for folks in a small and struggling congregation to see. Our own polity in the LCMS tends to isolate individual congregations. The preacher may want to do a little education on the good things that are happening in Christian communities around the world. Just looking at the actuary tables is interesting. There are about 2 billion Christians in the world. On an average day, out of that many folks about 100,000 will die. But Christianity is actually growing around the world. That means that over 100,000 new Christians were made this day and every day. 3 million per month. 36 million per year. Remember, the whole LCMS membership is less than month worth of Christian growth around the globe this year. That should both encourage and humble us.*

*Your children will come back to you (vs 4). This may have tremendous meaning for the people sitting in your pews. Many have seen their children in a self-imposed exile from Church. That is a matter of great pain, even darkness for them. Is the promise transferable here? Does God offer to them the good news that he also cares for my prodigals and apathetic children who won't be back to church again until the next Easter or Christmas Eve? Notice the imagery of the returning children. They are helpless, they come from great distance and they are born on the hip, little children, children who could not make that great journey by themselves. Many of our children who are not in church seem mired in lives which seem so dark and difficult that they cannot extricate themselves from their own problems. Is God promising to carry them home?*

*Of course the last line of this reading is why it is here. The gifts which wise men brought were seen many centuries before Jesus was born by Isaiah. Does Matthew include this story because he has Isaiah reverberating in his head/heart by the inspiration of the Spirit? I think so.*

*I have included the following verses because I wonder why they were not included. Foreigners build up the walls, the coastlands rejoice (that is probably Greece) and the gentile themes continue.*

Psalm 72:1-11 (12-15)

- Give the king your justice, O God,  
and your righteousness to the royal son!
- <sup>2</sup> May he judge your people with righteousness,  
and your poor with justice!
- <sup>3</sup> Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people,  
and the hills, in righteousness!
- <sup>4</sup> May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,  
give deliverance to the children of the needy,  
and crush the oppressor!
- <sup>5</sup> May they fear you while the sun endures,  
and as long as the moon, throughout all generations!
- <sup>6</sup> May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,  
like showers that water the earth!
- <sup>7</sup> In his days may the righteous flourish,  
and peace abound, till the moon be no more!
- <sup>8</sup> May he have dominion from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth!
- <sup>9</sup> May desert tribes bow down before him,  
and his enemies lick the dust!
- <sup>10</sup> May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands  
render him tribute;  
may the kings of Sheba and Seba  
bring gifts!
- <sup>11</sup> May all kings fall down before him,  
all nations serve him!
- <sup>12</sup> For he delivers the needy when he calls,  
the poor and him who has no helper.
- <sup>13</sup> He has pity on the weak and the needy,  
and saves the lives of the needy.
- <sup>14</sup> From oppression and violence he redeems their life,  
and precious is their blood in his sight.

<sup>15</sup> Long may he live;  
    may gold of Sheba be given to him!  
May prayer be made for him continually,  
    and blessings invoked for him all the day!

*The ascription suggests that this is a Psalm of Solomon.*

*Did you ever wonder where the English idiom “lick the dust” comes from? Check out verse 9.*

*The theme of the relationship to the gentiles and the nations continues throughout.*

Ephesians 3:1-12

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles—<sup>2</sup> assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you,<sup>3</sup> how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly.<sup>4</sup> When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ,<sup>5</sup> which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

<sup>7</sup> Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power.<sup>8</sup> To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,<sup>9</sup> and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,<sup>10</sup> so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.<sup>11</sup> This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord,<sup>12</sup> in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

*This reading focuses us on the great controversy which gripped the first generation of Christians and which gave us the Apostle Paul's letters, the inclusion of the Gentiles into the Church without demanding their adherence to the cultic laws of Judaism. From this distance and on this side of the issue, it is hard for us to imagine why this was such an issue. But for Paul's generation this was the issue. Already by the end of that century the issue had begun to fade. The resolution was not what Paul prayed and hoped for. The Jews utterly rejected their Christian cousins.*

*While Paul was still alive, however, the question was raging. Does one have to be a cultural Jew in order to be a Christian? The Jewish people had so jealously guarded their heritage and now the very things they had said were terribly important were not so important. Indeed, the Christian movement would force Jews to decide between two radically opposed readings of the Old Testament. Many of them would be unable to leave that old way of thought, but it also appears that many did and were simply absorbed into the ranks of Gentile Christianity.*



*This whole question would be superseded by other questions. The massive influx of the Gentile Christians would bring in the whole issue of Gnosticism for the Church. The Empire's persecution of Christianity until the time of Constantine would also force this issue off the table for some. For the Jews the destruction of the temple and the Bar Kochba rebellion in the early second century would disperse them throughout Europe and the Middle East once more, never to return in numbers again until the founding of the modern state of Israel. The Jewish/Gentile question is never really resolved as much as it is simply suspended by other events.*

*For us, we think it is resolved because there are hardly any Jewish Christians any more. It appears that the many Jews who were Christians were indeed absorbed into the Gentile communities after the fall of Jerusalem and their subsequent expulsion from the Synagogues.*

*Paul in the middle of the 50's or early 60's can look forward to another solution. In the verses immediately before these he sees a day when both Gentile and Jews are together in a church whose barriers have all been broken down by the sacrifice of Christ. In these verses he discusses his commission/vocation as an apostle to the Gentiles. He understands that he is a steward of a great mystery: God has welcomed Gentiles into the Church by his grace. Paul feels the radiance and joy of which Isaiah speaks at this mysterious work of God. The inexplicable tragedy, from his point of view, is that his fellow Jews do not feel the same elation.*

*The preacher of this text will want to point his hearers to the reality of their position as a Christian, they are there by the monumental and gracious action of God. Too many of us think we are here by some right, born into a Lutheran home or part of the great western Catholic tradition, but the grafting in of the gentiles into family of Abraham is the gracious action of God.*

Matthew 2:1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the

star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

*Today we focus on the advent of the wise men. Wise people still bring gifts to Jesus. I like to say that just before the offering sometimes. A preacher who knows his people might just see this as a time to celebrate the gifts that people bring to your congregation and to put these people into the same line of people that is headed by these Magi.*

*If you have a screen and project images or a good copier which can reproduce some detail, you might consider this image on the right. It is by Benozzo Gozzoli, a renaissance Italian artist and he painted it between 1459-1462. It depicts the Magi in procession*



*You might just want to crop down and get to this scene which occupies the left of the foreground in the larger painting. You will notice a couple of things. First of all, there is an African right in front. Secondly, you might be surprised that these don't look much like eastern sages but like Renaissance Italians. There is a reason for that. These are the people who are following the Magi. They are contemporary Italians, at least they were contemporary to Gozzoli. Students of the period can name many of these people who are in the picture as specific citizens of*

*Florence. Wise men still bear gifts to this Jesus. Gozzoli understood that. Perhaps most interesting is the figure who occupies the right front, riding at the head of the procession. This figure is the one who gives the painting its name: The Youngest King. Most interpreters of this painting suggest that this youngest king is none other than Lorenzo d' Medici or Lorenzo the Magnificent. Wise men have never stopped coming to worship this Jesus and bring him gifts. This painting can be found in the private chapel of the Medici family in Florence.*



*If you are interested in the more modern and historical question, Paul Maier again is a great resource on this. If our identification of them is correct, the Magi were not actually renaissance Italians but a scholarly class of priests in Persia. They likely came from the same people group which you and I would call Kurds today. Since the days of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian exile, a large Jewish community has resided in Babylon and become an influential part of that cosmopolitan empire. These sages would have had access to the writings of the OT as well as to the Talmud, Mishnah and other Jewish texts. That they ended up in Jerusalem by reading their resources is not all that farfetched.*

*What did they see? Who knows. No one can really say. There is much speculation about some sort of a super nova that appeared about this time. Others suggest that a comet, confluence of planets, or some other event which drew their attention. All of it relies on some rather speculative work. They saw something and they interpreted this as the sign of the birth of a great king. I think to try and explain this further is asking the text to answer questions it does not intend to answer.*

*Matthew does, however, want to say something about this Jesus. The gentiles beat the Jews to the worship of the Messiah. This must have almost been a galling message to the Jewish audience to which Matthew wrote. They were the chosen people of God! Here are pagan astrologers who got it right before we did. What does that say to us who consider ourselves insiders? One of my colleagues, Herb Hofer, was a missionary to India and until recently was charged with overseeing the LCMS work which happened there. He tells me an interesting story about what is happening there. Apparently Zion Lutheran Church in Kodaikanal, India has become a pilgrimage site. Every day but especially on Friday, for some reason which no one entirely knows, hundreds of Hindus come and pray to Jesus there. They are not baptized Christians. They may be part of a movement among Hindus to worship only Jesus, but no one really knows. Most Indian Christians are outcasts and often feel their Christianity is a way of distancing themselves from the caste Hindus who have oppressed them for centuries. They are not happy all the time to see these higher caste people come in. The local pastor just shakes his head. He doesn't understand it, his best guess is that the word has gotten out that prayers to Jesus in this place have power.*

*What will we make of this? Hindus who have not got the benefit of a Germanic heritage and two years of catechism classes are shaming us by frequenting church, prostrating themselves in humility before Jesus and praying fervent prayers that make our feeble table prayers and too often neglected personal prayers seem pale by comparison. How will we react to this? Will we rejoice or will we find something wrong with it? Will we be radiant or will we be indignant?*

*This is a little of what Matthew seems to have had in mind with the story of the Magi. This was offensive to a Jewish population which understood themselves as the chosen people. Why were the first worshippers of Jesus in this story not Jews but Gentiles? The answer lay in the great heart of God, His great love for all people.*

**Law**

1. There is great darkness in the world and it affects us and our loved ones. Like men groping for a way in the dark we are helpless. The pitfalls and stumbling blocks which about around us are inevitable.
2. We have no right to claim citizenship in heaven. Our sinful condition precludes that, our birth as an enemy of God condemns us. We have, in Paul's words, fallen short of the glory of God.
3. Because we are not citizens of heaven, our lives become grim. It really is all about getting ahead, this world's comforts/pleasures, often turning not into a delight in the things we have but in seeing the lack and failing of others. Just watch what passes for humor on TV. Can we laugh anymore except at the stumbling of someone else?
4. The separation we feel from one another, however, pales in comparison with the separation we have from God. Rendered insensate, even dead, spiritually, we may not even be aware that we are in such a dreadful condition. Like corpses we are unfeeling, unaware that some great harm is befalling us. This is a great darkness, our eyes are closed
5. For those of us who are in the light, this is especially painful to see in those whom we love, especially our children.
6. This darkness, however, can also afflict us; in fact a more impenetrable darkness can fall on those who sit in pews, as they think they are in the light. But when we believe that we ought to be here, that we are owed this place, then we are also darkened in our senses.

## **Gospel**

1. The Light of the World has come – He shines on us, the way to heaven is clear, the darkness has given way to his light. The pitfalls are still there, but now we see them differently. We are no longer ensnared in them.
2. Citizenship in heaven has been given to us. It was not owed or deserved, but by a great mysteriously gracious action on God's part, he included us in the kingdom. We are citizens in good standing of heaven.
3. Our life continues to have all the same problems it had before, but now we see them very differently. No longer fatalistically doomed to suffer, we know that our sufferings are momentary. The real truth of the matter is that we belong in heaven's joy and we will be there. Our suffering and the suffering of those around us becomes the darkness into which the light of Christ shines. We grieve the dark, rejoice at the light. That is much healthier
4. We are also now able to feel the joy of God's light. Our past is still there, our present is filled with problems, but Christ has come. He has come for me. That makes all this

different. No one is an enemy now, no one is completely in the dark. Even if the only light they see is the dim reflection of God's light in me, they are not entirely in the dark.

5. So we are not surprised when God does good things even in the darkest corners of the world. It might not make us always comfortable, but that could just be the darkness holding on for dear life.

### **Sermon Ideas**

1. The Light Shines - (That the hearer believes the good news – Jesus has come for all humanity, including me.)

This is the pastoral take on this festival. The primary problem this sermon addresses is the sense that all of us has that Jesus has come for someone else, for the good folks of the world. If the rest of the congregation really knew what was boiling up inside my mind and heart, they would not welcome me. This is the existential crisis of any Christian. What if what I think is faith is just me kidding myself? Do I really have what all the other Christians have?

This day we get to proclaim that Jesus has come into this world to save sinners, to shine his gracious light in the darkest of corners, including my corners and the corners of the folks around us. That has transformed me, the way I see myself, and the way I see everyone around me. As Paul said in II Corinthians he regards no one in the same old way as he used to see them (II Cor. 5:16).

But the preacher might want to take this not in an existential way but more in a communal way. For the hurting congregation, this might just be very vital. The parish that has been rocked by scandal, division, infighting, or simply feels the dreadful horror of demography as they see all the heads growing greyer and greyer within their congregation's membership. God loves them still. He still loves this place, delights in our worship, listens attentively to our prayers, and enjoys spending his time with us. We are his people.

2. The Light that still Shines: (That the Holy Spirit would move the hearer to join the global movement to proclaim the kingdom of Jesus to every human being.)

Jesus called all sorts of strange and intelligent folk to himself as an infant those many years ago. He is still calling strange and intelligent folks around the world. He has gazed into the eyes of every child who has ever been brought to a font and forgotten about none of them. He has known the heart of every human being he has created. He loves to shine in their lives. He is gathering folks, your children, your friends, aboriginals in New Guinea and the pierced guy with tattoos who might sit by you on the bus.

Epiphany can be proclaimed as a missional festival. God called the wise men from the East to Jesus' side to offer gifts, worship, and in order that he might forgive their sins too. Jesus is still calling people from around the world and from our neighborhoods as well. They are not the people we would likely invite of our own volition, however. Just as Jesus surprised his fellow Jews by welcoming gentiles like the wise men, but also the Canaanite woman (Mt 15), the Roman Centurion (MT 8), and others, he is still surprising folks. Today he surprises us and at the same time he calls folks through us.

This has been his method ever since he grabbed an uptight, zealous Jew named Saul of Tarsus and sent him as an emissary to the Gentiles of the first century. Today he is grabbing you.

We all probably made a new year resolution or two this past week. Make one more. Be the instrument of God's love and grace Jesus has created you to be in this coming year. He promises that he still speaks through your words (MT 18). Don't be afraid that you are not able. He uses unlikely and weak things, small like mustard seeds (MT 13). This doesn't depend on us, but on him – like a seed it grows all by itself (MK 4). God has made so many wonderful promises to us about the way his kingdom works. It is time for us to trust him, believe him, and actually speak of this Jesus and kingdom.

The preacher might see this as an opportunity to launch a series of sermons in the Epiphany season which will focus on God love for all people and his bizarre plan to use us to get that message out.

3. Wise men still bring him gifts (Gospel – that the Holy Spirit would place the hearer into the great procession of wise and gift-bearing people who have swelled the ranks of Christendom.)

You may want to use the picture by Gozzoli which I highlighted in the notes above.

Matthew depicts the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles – it is one of the great themes of his Gospel account. Only two people are told they have great faith by Jesus in Matthew. One is the Roman Centurion in Mt. 8 and the other is the Canaanite(!) woman in Mt. 15. Peter doesn't get that acclamation nor does any other disciples. Only foreigners get that. Matthew is making a point. God's love in Jesus embraces the whole of humanity. That means us too. We are part of that vast gentile horde which has been welcomed into the enfolding arms of our loving Jesus. When Matthew wrote my ancestors were likely worshipping some demonic spirits in the woods of Europe or Asia.

But this sermon wants to note another element of this story. This first instance of Jesus worship involves the giving of gifts. Every parish I have ever attended (and as a professor, I am regularly asked to preach in a lot of different parishes) has collected an offering at worship. When I was in Scotland I attended Holy Trinity, the parish where John Knox preached in St. Andrews. The collection of the offering was conducted with great reverence and an almost military precision. The offering was gathered from the

plates into a massive silver platter and reverently marched forward and placed on the altar with what was obviously an important ritual. Most of the time in the States and among my Lutheran parishes it has been rather desultory. A gum chewing usher shepherding plates through parish to the back and then marching them up to the front in order to hand it off to the preacher. Usually some bowing is involved and the plates are normally placed on the altar. Then quickly we are off to the prayers and the sacrament. It feels sometimes rather like a fiscally necessary but ugly intrusion of the world into our more spiritual realm of worship.

This sermon would like to create, remind, promote, support, (choose the verb appropriate to your situation) in people the idea that giving a gift is in fact a beautiful and solemn worship. The collection of an offering is in fact not an ugly intrusion but a beautiful expression. It is putting us right in line with these wise men. In the same way our recitation of the words “Lord, have mercy,” puts us into a line with all the lepers and blind and sick people who sought Jesus’ help in the Gospels and got that help. This story of wise men worshipping the Christ is our story.

This will need to be preached with some truths in mind:

- A. Our gifts are not just given to an organization/institution which occupies this physical place on the corner of such and such streets in our town. We are giving to Jesus. There are many ways to give to Jesus and this parish only one of them. This sermon should not equate Sunday offerings with true worship in a way which excludes the gift grandma Schultz gave to the local hospital or Bethesda guild.
- B. Jesus is not so concerned about the size or magnificence of the gift as he is the heart. The widow’s mite will be important here. That said, the giving of gifts is not disconnected from the heart. Jesus will say that where our treasure is, there will our heart be found. (Mt. 6:21). Jesus receives our gifts, large or small, because they are a tangible expression of the hearts he has called into life.
- C. The aforementioned should then preclude any gift-giving which is only apparently a gift but is in fact masking a purchase. God and His love are not for sale. Indeed, sometimes the largest of gifts may be in fact not be the true worship which we see in the widow’s mite. Jesus says as much when he notes that widow’s gift.
- D. The motive for the gift-worship is love, the love engendered by God’s love for unlovable, wretched sinners. We have just finished the great gift-giving season of secular and religious Christmas. We might see some opportunities to compare and contrast. This will not make sense according to the world. God’s love for us doesn’t either. Don’t ask it to make economic sense. The return on investment language needs to be banished from this conversation.

The goal of the sermon is really to see the act of offering gifts in church as a sacred action, something which has this great spiritual dimension to it. It is more than simply

keeping this beloved institution of this parish going. We are engaged in a conversation with the one who gave his life for me and has risen as my king to all eternity. He has opened up something utterly different than the fundraising motives which the world operates under.

The preacher might want to propose that we do somethings different here, but be careful of that. Worship traditions are not something to be changed lightly or on a whim. But you might include an offertory prayer today. There are several floating around out there or you could write one yourself. Speak it with the congregation as you place those plates on the altar. Decorum is another matter. Don't preach decorum but consider outside the sermon urging the ushers to straighten up a bit. Worship should draw our best from us.