

Matthew 2:1-12

This weekend we celebrate the Season of the Epiphany of the Lord and our readings today deal with epiphanies of different types in the prophecy of the Messiah. But what is an epiphany? In our common understanding of the term, an epiphany is akin to the lightbulb appearing above the head of a cartoon character when they have a great idea or inspiration. That's pretty close to a secondary definition of the word too: A moment of sudden and great revelation or realizations.

Our observance today literally comes from the primary definition, to which I'll return in a moment. For now, let's stick to the reliable lightbulb motif and ask ourselves this: Who responds to the light?

The magi come to Jerusalem explicitly by way of the light-the star of Bethlehem that has been above their heads and guiding them to the Messiah. Not much is known of the magi, but some have suggested that they were descendants of those who remained behind after the Babylonian captivity, scholars who knew the ancient scriptures and studied the skies for the signs promised. When the star appeared, they were prepared for it, if not exactly for what is actually portended. Having committed themselves to this study, they set off to verify the prophecy and may have assumed that all of Judea would embrace the delivery of a true king. The magi responded to the light, trusting in the providence of the Lord.

That's clearly not true of everyone, although the magi do not seem to realize it at first. The same light has appeared above the heads of Herod and his allies, who do not welcome its portents but rather fear it as an excuse for their superstitious subjects to revolt against their authority. Even when the magi explain the prophecy and the meaning of the light

above their heads, Herod plots to snuff out the life of the Messiah in order to protect his power and wealth.

The magi proceed to Bethlehem and the all-too-familiar tableau we reenact every Christmas. But what actually happens here? Until this point, the magi seem more interested in the Star as an intellectual pursuit; did the prophecy come to pass? Did they get it right? Not until they see Christ do they receive the actual Epiphany-this is not just the birth of a temporal monarch and future warlord as the Messiah was understood at the time, but the manifestation of the Lord in the flesh. Christ is the Light which appears not above them but in front of them, and His light dispels the darkness of doubt and fear. The magi see the Light and prostrate themselves in homage and acceptance. The shepherds, who come at the call of the angel through faith rather than intellectual curiosity, do the same.

Then, when the magi have embraced the truth of what they have seen, they receive another epiphany-this time about Herod. They now understand that Herod has no intention of paying homage, but sees the child as a threat. Now that their hearts have been opened, the Holy Spirit reveals to them the danger, and they pass around Jerusalem rather than through it, frustrating Herod's plans to kill Jesus.

The magi have fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah in their coming, at least symbolically. The growth of the church will fulfill it more literally as the Apostles and their spiritual descendants spread the Gospel and the light to all. Even so, Herod never sees this light, dismissing it as he did the star when it was above his head and being explained to him. Herod was given the light as was everyone else, and had more resources by which

to comprehend it. Instead, Herod wraps himself up in power and wealth, the love of which blinds him to his own salvation.

In the end, we can see ourselves in each of these manifestations. There are times when we keep ourselves wrapped in the pleasures and power of sin, not just blinded by darkness but actively seeking it in order to deny the truth of the Lord and the wages of sin. We become Herod in dismissing the wise and plotting to maintain our material comforts rather than open ourselves to the Lord. At other times, we seek the Lord as an intellectual pursuit, wrapping ourselves up in the historical nature of scripture and parsing out subtexts without embracing the Lord with our whole hearts.

But there are times of grace when we break through from the weight of the world and all its distractions to see salvation through Christ and our redemption from sin. We truly see the light, rather than hiding from it or observing it from oblique angles. Those are the times when we most become like the magi at the feet of Christ, experiencing not just our own epiphanies but His Epiphany most of all. And when we open our hearts to the Lord in that fashion, He can put us on that other path—the path that leads not to destruction but to salvation, away from becoming Herods of this world and in faith in life everlasting.