

Rev. Karen Graham - Church of the Redeemer

January 6, 2008 – Epiphany

“Worshiping Like the Magi”

Matthew 2: 1-12

A very long time ago, in the years before Christ, a Syrian ruler named Antiochus was extremely impressed with his own power and his own kingly abilities. So he changed his name, and assumed the name Antiochus Epiphanes, as a declaration to his subjects that he was the appearance, the manifestation, of a god on earth.

That’s what the word “epiphany” means -- manifestation. And we have entered the season of the Christian year when the church proclaims Christ Epiphanes. During this season of Epiphany we celebrate the manifestation of the gospel to the nations. “What was veiled is now unveiled. What was hidden is now revealed. Ignorance gives way to knowledge, darkness to light, hiddenness to openness.” God’s plan for all the ages has finally been revealed. In Jesus Christ, God’s eternal purpose is fully known. Jesus is the light of the world; Christ is the savior of all nations. In and through Jesus Christ, all people – Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female, rich, poor, young, old -- all people have access to God. During these weeks of Epiphany, from January 6 to Ash Wednesday on February 6, our gospel readings focus on the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, his baptism and the calling of his disciples. The epistle readings will be from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and we will get a sense of what it means to be Christ’s church, to believe in Jesus Christ and to be his fellow workers. These coming weeks are weeks we celebrate the light of Christ that shines in the world and at the same time be reminded of our responsibility of helping to carry the light of Christ into the world.

That’s what lies ahead. A preview of the Sundays to come. Today, however, we hear a familiar story. Matthew’s account of the coming of the Magi to Bethlehem is the gospel text for every January 6th, the Day of the Epiphany of our Lord. January 6th is the twelfth day of Christmas, and even though for most of us Christmas has already faded into the past, today we are celebrating the final piece of the Christmas story. The wise men have arrived at the stable. The Christ candle is still aglow. The Chrismon tree still adorns our sanctuary. Because the story isn’t complete until the Magi come. Until Jesus is made manifest not just as the babe in Bethlehem but as the savior of the

nations. Nearby shepherds came on Christmas Eve. Now foreigners from the faraway east come to worship the newborn king. The angels sang Gloria on that silent night, holy night. Now we hear of Herod's evil plotting, and the wise men's rejoicing with exceeding joy. The holiday may be over for us, the Christmas gifts opened and put in the toy boxes or hung in the closet or stacked in the bookcase. The cookies are practically gone. We've gone back to work, and the kids go back to school tomorrow. But here in church we still have one more day to celebrate. We still have another opportunity to reflect on what all this means. We have one more day to marvel at the wonderment of it all – before we settle back down to our usual routines. So let's enjoy this last day of Christmas, this day of the Epiphany of our Lord.

Matthew's story of the wisemen is packed with meaning. The king in power, Herod, is threatened by a baby. All of Jerusalem was afraid, yet strangers from the east rejoiced. The wise men follow a star, but it isn't until they've also searched the scriptures that they know where the star is leading them. So many twists and turns to the story. So much that could be explored and reflected on. But for today, let's single out these wise men, and as they followed a star, let's see if they can be an example for us to follow. We are beginning a new year as a congregation. Can we learn anything from these wise men? "We have seen his star, and have come to worship him." Before we get settled down into another year of coming to church on Sunday mornings, can these wise men be an example to us what coming to church on Sundays is all about? Let's listen and observe.

Read verse 10 with me: "When they saw the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Now the first part of verse 11: "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." That's the New Revised Standard Version -- but you know, I still prefer the regular Revised Standard version of these verses -- you probably remember them too: "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him." It's those words, "rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" that I really like. Because I like to imagine what that looked like. If Ohio State wins tomorrow night, will the Buckeyes rejoice exceedingly with great joy? I will. Oh, I know we don't usually picture the wise men jumping up and down and shouting and throwing confetti or pouring Gatorade on each other -- but what does "rejoicing exceedingly with great joy" look like? Surely it's more than a little smile. Surely it's more than a congratulatory handshake or a pat on the

back. We'll never know, I guess, but the wise men's response to Jesus would never have been mentioned if it was casual or ho-hum. Whatever "rejoicing exceedingly with great joy" actually looked like, it had to at least be impressive enough to be remembered. The wise men rejoiced like they had never rejoiced before. Not just a little bit – but exceedingly! They didn't have just a touch of joy -- they were overwhelmed with joy! Their rejoicing overflowed. Football fans of a winning team know what it is to rejoice with great joy. Children on Christmas morning who say they wish the day would never end know all about rejoicing with great joy. A young couple in love -- kids at a concert -- grandparents holding a new grandchild. We are people, who in other places, in other circumstances, know, I think, what it feels and looks like to rejoice exceedingly with great joy. Maybe it's not jumping up and down. Maybe it is. Maybe it's not always shouting and screaming – sometimes it might be tears flowing down your face -- but however we express it, great joy affects us. And what the wise men teach us is that our encounter with Christ should affect us, too. How do we act when we come to church? When we worship, do we rejoice exceedingly with great joy? If someone was observing our reaction to Christ, what would they see? Would they go home and write, "Those people in Church of the Redeemer rejoiced exceedingly with great joy"? I'm not saying that every week we have to be bouncing off the pews -- what I am saying is that our experience here together on Sunday mornings ought to be important enough to us that we are glad to be here. And that somehow we let that gladness show. The wise men did. Whatever they said or did was remembered. Their joy was not a hidden secret. Their joy could not be contained. "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."

"Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Worship included a time for offering gifts. The wise men brought gifts appropriate for a king. Royal gifts. The very best they had.

We too bring gifts. Every Sunday, after we've sung hymns of praise and heard the Scriptures read and proclaimed, after we've prayed together, we respond with our offerings. While it's true that the best gift we can give is ourselves – our faith, our commitment, our willingness to serve others, it's also true that what we put in the collection plate is a financial offering. We collect money for the ministry, mission, and maintenance of this church. Our pledged giving in 2007 fell short by over \$11,000. Due to other sources of income, and due to cutting back in other areas, we were able to pay our apportionments 100%. Which I'm glad about -- but I also know what we weren't

able to do in 2007. Some major repairs were put on hold. Some needed purchases weren't made. And now we are beginning another year of giving to the church. And so I'm asking you, challenging you, to consider how important this church is to you – to this community -- to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is important enough for us to give the very best we have? Not our leftovers, but our first fruits? Not our spare change, but our top dollar? How we approach our giving makes all the difference.

The wise men brought appropriate gifts to the Christ child. Gifts they had selected ahead of time and carried with them on their long journey. Not last-minute gifts. Not bargain basement gifts. Cost is not the issue. \$1 from a woman who only has \$10 is an expensive gift. \$1 from a woman with a \$1000 is not a costly gift. Which is more valuable? The wise men were not trying to impress Jesus with expensive gifts. A little boy is probably not that interested in gold, frankincense and myrrh anyway. Most 2 year olds like toys. What Matthew is telling us is that wise men revered Jesus enough to offer him gifts appropriate to his stature as king. They brought a king royal gifts. If we follow their example, we will offer gifts fitting to who Christ is for us and for the world. Do we give our Savior less than we give our paper boy? Do we give the Body of Christ less than we give the shopping mall or the movie theatre or the golf course or the football stadium? The wise men opened their treasures. Treasures are things we value – things important and special to us. When we give our offering, are we opening treasures?

After their rejoicing and their gift-giving, the wise men left. But not by the way they came. "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." Or again in the RSV words, "They departed to their own country by another way." Of course Matthew includes this bit of information because of Herod's evil intentions. To return to Herod would be dangerous. So for safety's sake, they had to leave by a different route. But could Matthew mean for his readers to read anything more into his words? I think so. Worshiping the Christ child had a life-changing impact on the wise men. They left by a different way than which they came. They left, we could say, as different people. They could not return to their old ways. Their encounter with Christ changed the course of their lives.

Jesus Christ makes an impact on human lives. The good news of Christ makes a difference in our world. That's the message of Epiphany. A message we need to hear and to proclaim. Sometimes we can get a little cynical when we hear other people

testify to the impact Christ has had on their lives. Oh sure, we say. That's great. But what about me, what about us? But the truth is, that whenever one of us can testify to the impact of Christ, all of us benefit. Whenever one of us shares how Christ and Christ's church has caused us to leave by a different way, all of us can learn something. For I think that in our own places, through our own experiences, each and every one of us is changed by Christ. Whether we can pinpoint it or not, whether or not we can even put it into words, our Christian worship has an impact on us. Because worship provides occasions for transformation. For renewal –for forgiveness – for rededication. Whatever we call it, we can come here on Sunday morning feeling one way and we can leave here feeling another. Maybe we're preoccupied with a whole bunch of worries and concerns in our lives, and maybe when church is over our minds are cleared and we hear God's word as never heard before. Haven't you ever come here worn-out and left here re-energized? Or empty inside when we sit down and filled up when we stand to leave? True worship is worship that makes a difference in our lives. We come here to worship in the sanctuary and we leave here ready to worship throughout the week in our daily lives. By the words we speak and the actions we do. By how we love our neighbor. By our praying and our caring and our sharing. Our encounter with Christ, our faith in Christ, and our commitment to Christ's church, make a difference. Our lives are set on a different course. From guilty to forgiven. From heavy-laden to free. From broken to whole.

So as we begin this season of Epiphany, let us remember and give thanks to God for the wise men who fell down and worshiped the Savior. May we follow their example of rejoicing and giving. And as Christ enters into our hearts, may we too become people who leave behind our old ways and live as Christ's new people. As we fall down and worship, let us celebrate Christ Epiphanyes – the light of the world who shines in our hearts, the Savior of all the nations who has saved us with his grace and sent us forth with his blessing. Amen.