

In the name of Jesus Christ who redeemed the world. Amen.

This is the celebration day of the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ. Today marks the end of the Christmas season in the Church. Everybody knows about Christmas – and Easter – they’re the two times every year when almost ALL Christians go to church. But did you know that for the first three centuries of Christianity, it was NOT Easter and Christmas, but Easter and Epiphany that were the huge celebrations? Along with Pentecost – the day the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles, Easter and Epiphany were the early Church’s biggest celebrations. It was not until Constantine’s time, when it had become legal to be a Christian that the date December 25<sup>th</sup> was chosen as the day to celebrate Jesus’ birth and the day became a holiday. Until that time, it was Epiphany that was the “big deal,” of the Church year. What was it about the Epiphany – the showing forth or revealing of God as human – that made it more important than the birth of the Christ child?

The word, epiphany means, a “showing forth,” or the “revealing of something,” that previously had not been seen. A modern writer described an epiphany as, “an AHA moment,” the moment when the light bulb goes on above our heads.

Matthew’s Gospel is the only one that contains the story of the Epiphany. In Matthew we hear about three wise men – that’s one of the translations for the word

“Magi,” which is what they’re called in Matthew, wise men. Calling them “kings,” comes from tradition rather than scholarship. Somewhere along the way, someone said, “Gee, they had gold and frankincense and myrrh, they must have been rich so they were probably kings.” There is also some disagreement among scholars about where they might have come from. The predominance of the scholarship is that they came from Persia – or modern day Iran – while other scholars think Egypt and still others, Arabia or Chaldea. But wherever they came from, Matthew’s message is clear; they came from somewhere other than Galilee or Judea and they were astrologers, possibly Zoroastrian priests, which meant that they were NOT Jews.

Matthew’s message is clear from this story of early visitors to the Holy Family. Jesus was the King of kings – to be worshipped by all. But He was also different than other kings. His true identity was shown – in other words the epiphany of who this child was, the “aha,” moment – was made first to “outsiders,” or the “unclean,” before it was made manifest to the Children of Israel. The story of the visitation of the Magi was truly scandalous to Matthew’s early hearers.

Having Jesus’ first guests be foreigners who worshipped a different god was of huge significance to Matthew. What this said to Matthew’s predominantly Jewish audience was that Jesus’ identity and purpose was made known to Gentiles in just as magnificent a way as, and even before it was made known to Jews. That meant that the wall between Jews and Gentiles was to be broken down by this baby boy. Jews had

always believed that THEY were God's chosen people; God's ONLY chosen people. If the Messiah was shown to Gentiles even before He was to the Jews, then the Gentiles occupied a place in God's created order that was far different than the Jews had ever considered. As St. Paul later told the church in Ephesus, "in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." Now let's consider the larger implications of that for a moment.

If Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea and raised in Nazareth of Galilee, and if He was born to Jewish parents and was raised as a Jew, and if Jesus was, indeed the Messiah, there is a pretty good indication that Jesus came as the anticipated Savior to the Jews. BUT ... if Jesus the Christ was also made manifest to the Gentiles in that same Nativity event, then Jesus definitely came to save Gentiles as well as Jews. That means Jesus came to save EVERYONE – because in Matthew's day there were only two groups of people, Jews and Gentiles; you were either one or the other.

So ... if Jesus came to save EVERYONE, that means He came to save YOU, and He came to save ME. It can be much easier for us to consider that Jesus came to save everyone than it can be to consider that He came to save me. I know what my life history looks like. I know the number of commandments I've broken; the number of sins I've committed; the number of people I've hurt. On second thought, I probably DON'T know

the number of sins I've committed or the number of people I've hurt. Those numbers are just too high and stretch out over too many years. It's really hard to believe that Jesus came into the world to save ME. I know I don't deserve that. No matter how many times I've confessed my sins, I've never been able to name them ALL, and as soon as I've confessed the ones I can think of, I've done something else to replace the sins I've confessed. So it's hard to believe that Jesus came to save ME from all that sinning. But He did. Again from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, "by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, ...."

Jesus came into the world to save ME and to save YOU. That's a very empowering and yet humbling thought. Jesus came into the world to save me. So there's not much I cannot accomplish in His name. His death and resurrection ransomed my life from the power of sin and death and set me free. People who live free are not held back and can accomplish great things. That's empowerment. But His coming to save EVERYONE also creates some problems for our limited, human understanding of things.

Jesus came into the world to save you ... and you; He came to save everyone. That means that every fire-breathing, Bible beating preacher you EVER hear who tells you that he or she knows who is going to hell, is wrong. Jesus offered Himself in sacrifice once, for all humanity and for all time. That means that there is salvation for EVERY human being. No one – not you, not me, certainly not any fundamentalist

preacher, gets to judge who is worthy of the glory of God's everlasting love. Jesus made that determination on the cross.

By the grace of God, we've been redeemed – thanks be to God for that. But along with that reality is the reality that the people who commit heinous crimes have been redeemed. Murderers, people who mug retired people for their Social Security checks, even child molesters and the 17 men who executed the 9/11 plan – all have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God loves US ALL as God's very own creation. We are ALL children of the Living God and, as St. Paul told the church in Rome, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

So ... will we see Charles Manson in heaven? Will Adolph Hitler, Pol Pot and Idi Amin be seated around the same banquet table with Jesus at the foot of the table, in the servant's spot? I doubt it. Those folks, and all the ones like them have so far removed themselves from God's grace that they no longer know how to accept it. But the point is, I DON'T KNOW who will be in heaven, and it's not my job to make that determination. Here's what I believe. All of God's love for us shown through in the salvation offered us by the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross. That salvation has ALREADY been given us. All we have to do is ACCEPT it. It was given to us by the grace of God and therefore we can do NOTHING to earn it. We simply have to accept it. Will Charlie

Manson and Adolph Hitler and the rest accept the grace of God, probably not – but I DON'T know that for sure. That's in God's hands. And it's not my job to figure out what conditions those people have to satisfy to be worthy of God's grace. None of us is worthy. Not one. But we have received salvation through grace ANYWAY. For that we should be eternally thankful. And we should spend a lifetime working for God's Kingdom in order to give back, in some small way, for God's unmerited grace.

So the next time someone tries to tell you who is blessed and who is cursed in this world; the next time you read or hear about how someone is going to hell because he or she doesn't believe, or look or behave the same as the person doing the judging, you remember this sermon. Remember the Epiphany and what it meant – and what it means today. God became a human and lived as one of us – and died on a cross – and rose again – for ALL of us. Christ Jesus is the Savior of the World – even the parts we don't like. I don't know about you, but for me, THAT'S an Epiphany.

Amen.