

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.  
Sunday, January 6, 2008

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Let us pray. Lord, I pray that you bless the speaking and the hearing of this word. Let it be your word. Let it be inspired and inspiration to those who hear it. In Jesus Name, Amen.

Maybe you've heard this story before. I know some of you did because you were at the 9:00 service. About the little girl who came home from school about this time of year, right after Christmas break, and she got her report card, and on her report card was an F in spelling of all things. Her mother was shocked and demanded an explanation, and said, “Young lady, how can you make an F in spelling?” The little girl said, “Mommy, words fail me.” Okay. It's bad. It's bad.

Epiphany is one of those words that fails us. It comes and goes on the tail end of Christmas, and some of us kind of halfway understand it, and halfway know what it means, and then we let it go. It was a purely Christian church word in the beginning. It was the church's word. If you count it up on the calendar, after 12 days of Christmas comes Epiphany, January 6. It was the festival of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the manifestation. It literally means a striking appearance all at once to be made known. What was the striking appearance? What was made manifest? It was God made manifest.

The one God making the striking appearance in the baby Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, the expected Savior, finally shows up, and was recognized not by those who expected him, but instead by the decidedly unkosher Gentile, Magi. That's part of this message. The unexpected, the outsiders recognized and worshiped and brought the gifts, and that is the traditional reason why we exchange gifts at Christmas. The message is at once wonderful and tragic. God has come to us at last all the way down to us in flesh and almost no one noticed. Those who did were not the ones you'd expect! He came in a way that you would never expect, and the earthly powers wanted him dead, not worshiped.

Epiphany is wonderful and tragic all at once. As a word, it did in the beginning belong exclusively to the church, but now its meaning has drifted. When I went on vacation last year, I indulge in guilty pleasures on vacation. I'll go see a movie on vacation, and usually I see about one a year. I'll actually read, just to empty my mind of serious thoughts, I will read “The National Enquirer” on vacation. Just to see what people who read the “Enquirer” are seeing.

I once saw the Simpsons movie. That's mindless. In the Simpsons movie, Homer had an epiphany. Now you see, the word has changed. It no longer belongs just to the church. If Homer can have an epiphany, then it's no longer the church's word. His epiphany was, “Hey! Other people count! They matter, too!” That will preach another day.

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Now, the word has come to mean a personal sudden insight into the reality of things, a sudden bolt of understanding about God, the universe, and everything. When we have those insights, we call them epiphanies of our own. Today, we celebrate that Jesus was the Epiphany in making God know. We can have these little epiphanies in our understanding when things come together, and all at once, we see and understand what we have not seen or not understood before.

I recall that back at Wofford College, a biology professor used a form of the word to describe the instant, and as I warned the people this morning, when I start to tell a biology story, I know you shut down, but it gets somewhere. It gets interesting. He described the instant, the moment when a fertilized egg changes from undifferentiated cells where each cell is just precisely the same, he used the word epiphany to describe the instant when those generic cells suddenly started to become different and reveal what each was destined to become – some the heart, some the liver, some the brain, some the skeleton, etc. Now, I don't really know if the professor made up that use of the word, or whether it is an archaic biological term. I couldn't find it anywhere. If it's not on the Internet then it's probably not real. Certainly that word and the way he used it helped me picture and remember and even laugh a little bit about that moment that these undifferentiated cells became for instance, me in the making. I laughed because I pictured these cells, this cell mass just looking around and saying, so, this is what I'm going to be, this is what I'm going to be.

Well, the Magi came to see the baby Jesus so humble in his birth, and by their gifts and worship, they were saying so this is how God is going to come to us! The Epiphany! These Gentiles, these outsiders, recognizing him as the Messiah. They were saying so this is how God is going to come to us. It is not a story about the rich and the powerful bringing gifts to Jesus, the Christ. No, it is about outsiders and outcasts and foreigners who had no part in the 12 tribes of Israel noticing before those who held the promise, noticing what God was doing. It is an exact parallel of the outcast shepherds in the field mentioned in Luke. It is important to remember that no one important showed up! No religious leaders showed up! No real kings or queens showed up at Jesus' birth!

The message is that Jesus birth as it was throughout his life and ministry and then his crucifixion that the powerful and the wealthy and the elite stayed away in droves.

It reminds me of saying that Bayard Lindell told me that Yogi Berra once said. You know Yogi Berra expressed himself beautifully. Well, Yogi Berra said about the people not coming to the stadium, if they don't want to come, how can you stop 'em?

The powerful and the wealthy and the elite stayed away in droves. They had already had their reward and their agendas and power and prestige of their own. They were not interested in a Messiah, definitely not the kind of Messiah, who would be born in a barn and laid in a feeding trough. Epiphany celebrates, as John's Gospel says, the word become flesh and dwelling among us, the word, which was God, pitching his tent here with us. Our God is not a fuzzy cloud, a cosmic goodwill. Our God is not a mystical Oz,

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who is used as a mouthpiece for shysters and con men selling prosperity on the television. Our God is not abstract, and not so easily bent into the service of self-serving men and women.

If we are to know whom our God is and what God is like, we must understand Epiphany. The birth of Jesus is the birth of God among us. A loving God who lived among his people much like us, a man who felt pain, who felt the power of sin though was without sin, and yet even felt temptation as we do. Hard to imagine, but it says so in the Scripture.

This world was his world in more ways than one. It was his from creation. It was his from living here, living here among the dirt, the despair, the waste, the decay. Epiphany brings to mind something that happened to me when I was younger, when my youngest daughter, Christina, was about three years old. I used to love to play this game with her. I'm not sure she loved it. It was not child abuse. It was all in good fun. She made a face out of construction paper with little eyes cut out. It was a mask, sort of a monster mask. I'm not sure. It was an abstract. She was three. I put it in front of my face, and I chased her around the house, and I was chasing her, and it was all good fun. She was yelling and screaming, but laughing at the same time. Then when I got her cornered in one room, she looked up sideways, and she was whimpering a little bit, and she put her hands up, and she said, "I want to see Daddy. I want to see Daddy. Take away the mask."

The world was frightened. The world was backed up in a corner whimpering, I want to see Daddy, and Daddy came. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. That word in flesh was Jesus, and when we see Jesus, we see Abba, Daddy, Father. With God's face toward us in Jesus Christ, all the fears of guilt and sin and death drop away as easily as a paper mask. In the light and the love and the hope of Jesus Christ, they have been conquered. They are no longer real for us. In faith, the fear and guilt and sin and death are mere shadows in the face of the eternal reality of the light of Jesus Christ.

If you look back over 2007, as many of us have been doing, and I'm sort of a news junkie, you will remember there were many, many accidents in mines all over the world in this country as well. Many stories about miners. Some ended badly, and some ended well. Imagine yourself for just a moment, trapped for days in a mine, wandering aimlessly through stale thin air, and imagine how you would feel when you finally saw more than just the dim reflections of your fading flashlight, but imagine when you saw real light, true light coming from outside. How dramatic! How joyful that would be!

The light of Christ pierces our darkness with the same dramatic quality and difference. Christ's light was not the same as the faint reflections we project onto the things we pretend are important. Christ's light is from outside. It shows us there's a way out in Jesus Christ.

What has God done in Jesus birth? He has set in motion a plan of salvation for us, salvation from the guilt of sin and the fear of death. Healing and wholeness are also

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wrapped up in that word salvation. That is God’s great gift. To set us right with God, and right with each other. To forgive us and to give us the power to forgive each other. To forgive us and to give us the power to forgive each other so that we might be at peace vertically and at peace horizontally. God’s gift of love, hope and healing, did arrive rather oddly at Bethlehem. We weren’t asked to sign for it, and even if we didn’t order it, there it is! God’s gift wrapped for us in swaddling clothes had been dumped on our back porch with no return address, and we have to do something with it. Jesus was delivered unto us. What shall we do?

You know, unopened gifts are not much good. You can have a beautifully wrapped package, but if you don’t open it, it does you no good. A wonderful gift unopened is no good. The precious touching story of the birth of Jesus – have you opened the wrappings of this superficial story to discover the gift inside? He was a Savior, a Messiah, but born to save us from what? Why do we need one? If I don’t feel I need a Savior, then what? If I do feel the need for a Savior, then the question about Jesus becomes, what shall we do?

During World War II, an army chaplain decided to surprise his children at Christmas after a lengthy tour overseas. They got up sleepy-eyed Christmas morning expecting only presents and some decorations, but instead out from behind the tree came their father, unexpectedly and to their great delight! Like those children on Christmas morn, we can become satisfied with the small presents and some tinsel and a few blinking lights, but every now and then, and maybe this morning, God bursts in and becomes so real to us that everything else pales in comparison. Like shepherds at Bethlehem, we can be hanging out with sheep, looking for nothing special, and find God himself. Like Magi, you may be looking for something grander and bigger, but find God humble and huddled in ordinary surroundings. God is like that. God will sneak up on you.

Christmas says that, and Epiphany says, most people won’t notice what God is doing. God came once unexpectedly. That seems to be God’s favorite way to work. If you read the Old Testament all the way through to the New Testament, you’ll find that instead of the oldest son who was expected to do well, it’s so often the youngest one, who does wonderful things for God and for God’s people. It’s the outcasts instead of the bluebloods over and over, and here in Matthew, it is the Gentile Magi instead of the priest, and with the cross itself, the apparent weakness of the cross, instead of the power of generals and armies, which the people said they wanted.

Through people like you and me in situations ordinary and dusty, look for and expect God. That’s where you will find God. Live looking for God’s presence in unexpected ways. Live looking for God to call you to act in unexpected ways, and life will certainly be more interesting! I promise. I promise. Don’t underestimate the value of God’s gift. The Magi did get one thing absolutely right. The proper response to what God did at Jesus’ birth was to drop what you were doing and bring the best you had and rejoice and worship. So often we don’t get what God has done. It seems so simple at first, and we don’t understand how huge a gift it is. Jesus, God come to us.

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Let me swap gears just one second. I want to get personal, and remind you of what just happened this past Christmas, or maybe it happened a few Christmases ago, but I bet this has happened to most of us. It has happened to me. Have you ever been sitting at family Christmas gathering where all the family is around, and let's just call her Aunt Mabel. Aunt Mabel hands you this great big present. She shuffles over and gives it to you. Your heart sinks as you give her back the tiny envelope with your gift for her in it. You open Aunt Mabel's gift, and it's a hand-knit sweater made from wool from her own sheet, which she spun and knit over two years, taking time out only to put Ben-Gay on her arthritic hands! You cringe because she's about to open your present, and it's a really nice bookmark that you almost got the clearance tag off before wrapping.

When people give us something so big and expensive, we can't match it in return, we feel bad. Well, God has given us something wonderful in Jesus Christ – an offer of love and life and hope eternal – and we cannot match it! No, we cannot match it, but we can appreciate it. We can appreciate it. For some, it has not sunk in that this gift of Jesus cost God a great deal. How do we live out our gratitude for such a gift?

All this past week, I know that department stores everywhere are getting gift returns. When we don't like something, we just exchange it. That's almost what the religious leaders of Jesus' time did. They said, no, that's not the kind of Messiah we wanted. We wanted God a little bigger, a little more exclusive, this common man cannot be for us, and later crucify him. In our hearts, we fall either on the side of celebration in Christ or try to exchange him for something more to our liking.

You've got a Savior, delivered to your door, to your back door. There's no mistake. The gift is now opened, and now you've got to keep it, appreciate it, or exchange it for another. Theologian Paul Tillich was famous for saying, “What you desire above all else is your God.” What you desire above all else, that is your God. You're worshipping that whether you say it in those words or not, you are. What you put faith and hope and trust in more than anything else is your functional Savior. Even in the church, there are those who whine a little, is this all we get? Yes, for now, you get hope and you get a promise that Jesus will ultimately serve as a better Savior than wealth and fame and power and other things people sell their souls for. There is no hard and fast proof. It takes faith, and faith asks, is God's promise good enough for you? The babe whose name means he who saves grew to be a man who died on a cross and was resurrected and promised to prepare a place for us. That is what we have as well as God's spirit descended and within us now.

A Savior's birth is rejoiced in only by those who have known fear and known guilt and known hopelessness. The birth of the Savior is good news and glad tidings only to those who were looking for guidance and help beyond themselves, and found it in Jesus the Christ. We have this good news, the good news that in Christ, God's kingdom is begun, and is coming in. The bad news is we the church has work to do. It's not really bad news, but it is something we must do. We, the church, have the job to continue Christ's

## “Gift Exchange”

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ministry until his coming again, his ministry of love, of hope, and of freedom from fear, from guilt, from sin, and from death. That is part of the answer to what shall we do. Where Jesus left off in his ministry, we are to take over in his Name and with the power and guidance of his spirit. The good news and the word become flesh. It's not just a personal autographed invitation for a lucky few. It is more like a chain letter that must be spread to ten friends, and then ten friends more, until everybody gets the news. The gift from God is in our hands. What shall we do?

We are called to go and make disciples, to pass it on, and to pass it on, and pass it on again, like so many people have done over the past week, and some of you have done today. Look what so and so gave to me or look what so and so gave to me. We witness in the same way. Look at what God has given me. Look at the love, the forgiveness, and the hope that God has given me. Look at the peace that God has given me. I am not perfect yet, but let me share with you and show you what God has given me. Pass on with the same joy the Gospel as we rejoice in the more physical gifts we exchange and receive. Amen.