

Epiphany 2004
"You Advertise Jesus"
The Rev. Thomas W. Simmons IV

Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany. I'm going to tell you what that means in a minute but first let me give you a little lesson on the Christian calendar. Everyone just celebrated New Years, January 1, but for Christians the year begins a month earlier on the first Sunday of Advent.

This is where everything begins, with anticipation of Messiah's coming. It culminates with the great celebration the Nativity, the birth of Jesus. We proclaim the glory of the day with the special way we do that liturgy and decorate this place. But with all the pomp and circumstance of the Nativity, it's easy to forget that on Christmas, **the good stuff is ONLY BEGINNING!**

And it's a very small beginning at that: a baby born in a barn on a dark night in Bethlehem, announced to shepherds. That's just the start. It gets us primed for what follows as Jesus is manifested to the world. That's what the season of Epiphany is about. With the visit of the Magi and Jesus' baptism, which we commemorate next week, **Jesus' fame begins to spread** throughout Palestine and the world.

That's what the word Epiphany means. It's a Greek word meaning 'to manifest' or 'put on display'. In our commercial culture, we can think of it as advertising, publicity or promotion. In the season of Epiphany, from now to the start of Lent in February, **Jesus Christ is advertised to the world.**

We see this Epiphany in each of the Scripture texts appointed for today. Isaiah, who preached over 500 years before Christ, looks ahead to a future in which the glory of God will shine out to the world. "Nations will come to this light and kings to the brightness of your dawning."

Isaiah tells the people to "lift up your eyes and look around" at **the multitudes of the nations coming to worship** the God of Israel. They bring their wealth as an offering: camels caravans from the desert and the ships of Tarshish from the sea bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. Our Psalm presents the same vision.

The manifestation of God that Isaiah envisions literally *changes the world*. It reorients the nations of the earth from darkness and idolatry to the true worship of God. In Isaiah's day God's salvation did not extend much farther than ethnic Israel, but Isaiah sees the day when the nations will come from near and far to see the glory of God.

In the language of our commercial culture, you could say that Epiphany is quite a marketing coup. God is reaching *global* markets here, a truly worldwide audience. **Isaiah envisions a sensation that sweeps the planet.**

Fast-forward several hundred years to Matthew. He shows us the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. He picks up on its imagery to describe the events that followed the birth of Jesus. Jesus' birth itself didn't receive much coverage.

But then a special star begins to shine brightly in the night. Like Isaiah said, "A light in the darkness." **That star was an epiphany**, a sign of Christ's manifestation to the world. The publicity is beginning.

Far to the east in Persia, the three Magi, schooled in the arts of astrology, recognize the star for what it is. They gather their gifts, load up their camel caravan and begin the long journey across the Arabian desert to Palestine. They follow the star to Jerusalem where they stop to ask directions from Herod, the king of Judah. Do you see how the news is spreading?

In these three exotic figures from the East, we see the beginning fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. Matthew shows us that **the kings of the earth are indeed coming to Messiah** and are bringing their wealth of gold, frankincense and myrrh, just as Isaiah said.

And this is just the beginning. Throughout his ministry Jesus hinted at the international scope of his Kingdom. In his great commission, he urged the apostles to **"make disciples of all nations."** And make disciples they did.

Which brings us to Paul and our passage from his letter to the Ephesians. He speaks of **how the epiphany of Christ has completely reoriented his life.** As I read it this week, I thought of a conversation I recently had with the doctor who's going to fix my hernia.

He looked at me and said "You don't LOOK like a priest!" I hear that from time to time. **He asked me how I ended up getting into "that line of work."** There are a number of ways of answering that question.

With this guy I emphasized that it was all about God. **God converted me** in college when I was an atheist. **God changed me** over a span of several years into a relatively mature Christian. **God called me** to the ministry when I was serving on a Senate Committee staff and as a machine gunner in an infantry company in the National Guard.

God called me to the priesthood. I didn't want to do it and I didn't think I could do it. But God changed all that. He made it into the thing I love to do the best and the thing I do the best. As a result, I've just got to preach and lead God's people. I'm Building Christians for Service. That's how Christ is manifest in my life.

I hear Paul saying something similar in his epistle. He saw Christ's manifestation and it completely changed his life. "Although I am the very least of all the saints,

this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ." **His goal is "to make everyone see."**

He did it by proclaiming the Christian faith by his words and his example to everyone he came in contact with. He baptized them and taught them how to follow Jesus. He established Christian communities all over the Roman world. He was Building Christians for Service.

It started really small, but within three centuries, the Emperor Constantine himself came to Christ and with him, **the entire Roman Empire converted** and its wealth and power was turned to building the Church. Isaiah's vision was fulfilled. And the gospel has continued to grow and spread around the world ever since.

And here we are today, Christians gathered to worship Jesus Christ in a part of the world that wasn't even known to exist in Paul's day. Like the Magi we, and over a billion others around the world, open the treasure chests of our lives and offer our time, talent and tithe in love and worship and service to Jesus. **The epiphany of Christ continues in the world today.**

And the key point to remember is that **Christ is made manifest *through his people* - THROUGH US.** . Paul saw that so clearly. He said, "*through the church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known..."

So, on this Feast of Epiphany our identity and mission in Purcellville is clear. WE ARE THAT CHURCH. Christ has come into the world and he is manifest *through us*, through our faithfulness, community and witness...our advertising.

When I think of the neighborhood across the street I feel this urgency, this feeling of being overwhelmed, people are moving in much faster than we are reaching out. How are we going to manifest Christ to them? How are we going to build Christians over there?

Like Paul, our mission is "to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ" and "to make everyone see" his glory. So, happy Epiphany. I'd like to make 2004 a year in which we as a parish and as individual people in it make some serious strides in effectively manifesting Jesus to the world around us.

Let's pray.

"Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name." AMEN

