

## EPIPHANY SUNDAY

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and God's glory will appear over you.  
Nations shall come to your light,  
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.* Isaiah 60:1

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.* Matthew 2:10

Let's say we're the three Wise Men. Or the Three Kings of the Orient. What's our story?

We come from an advanced and powerful society – advanced in the ancient world – a country with an honorable history and a well-developed system of thought. We are thoroughly versed in the ways of our people, and we accept those ways and build upon them. We partake of the comfort and privilege that surround and define us.

We've been recognized as gifted and talented, and we've been highly educated. We are believed to have exceptional powers: of insight, of understanding– of seeing, if not into the future, into the deep and distant present. Therefore, we are people of status in our own country. We are not eccentrics or rebels, we are authorities in our field.

Because other people believe in our wisdom and powers of comprehension, we have come to believe in them ourselves. We trust the power of our personal thought and the validity of our belief systems. We value our autonomy and independence, our intellectual grasp of the world.

And then something happens. We hear news from afar– a faint, mysterious message. A child has appeared in a country far away. His people are not our people, their beliefs differ from our own. But we have studied their traditions and their religion, and we understand that this child is destined to become the King of the Jews

What can that possibly mean? How can a child of obscure origins and dubious beginnings possibly fulfill such a grandiose expectation? How can a baby alleged to have been born in an outbuilding in a remote town in a country oppressed by Roman occupation be the answer to the hopes and yearnings of centuries? And what can this event possibly have to do with our established, successful lives?

And yet, we feel somehow, in defiance of all our settled beliefs and practices, against all rationality, that something about this birth, this child, calls out to us. Something beckons us beyond all reason and experience to travel to see and to honor this foreign child, to participate in this strange development.

And so we prepare to go. We may encounter skepticism from our associates as we announce our plans—skepticism and more: incredulity, even ridicule. We have secure reputations and routines. If we make this bizarre journey, we will put our credibility at risk. We will be defying the practices and expectations of our culture. When we return, if we return, everything may be different for us. We may have lost our foothold. We may have to readjust our assumptions, and other people's assumptions of us.

Nevertheless, we go. Our camels carry saddlebags full of the supplies we need for the journey, as well as exotic treasures for the alleged Child King. And we carry our compelling curiosity and hope, along with our own doubts and ambivalence, as we make our midwinter voyage.

And we get there; finally we arrive at our destination. We are weary. The journey has worn us out, not only, or even principally, physically, but psychically, emotionally. We've been battling our uncertainties and misgivings all the way. Where are we going? And why? What is the meaning of this unexpected trip? What are we expecting to find? Can the struggle possibly be worth the effort? Will we even be welcome?

We dismount, and tentatively, hesitantly, we enter the place where the child resides. We do not check our doubt at the door, our questions accompany us all the way. The dim space is crowded with strangers. We kneel – as others are kneeling. We pray their prayers with them. We leave the gifts we have brought with us. And we depart.

We leave, but we take with us some powerful, inexplicable emotion. For want of a better word, we might call the feeling joy. Or recognition. Or awe. Whatever the sensation is, however we may name it or not name it – the sensation does not leave us. It may have struck us suddenly, powerfully, overwhelmingly. One of us tells the story that way.

But for another the effect is gradual, subtle, surreptitious. It creeps up on us over time. Much as we resist the feelings inspired in us by our visit, much as we try to dismiss the experience, we can never quite succeed.

We begin our journey home. But the way is different, somehow. We seem to be taking another road. And along the way we begin to be aware – an awareness that may be alarming, distracting, discomfoting, or that may be comforting, may come in the form of blessed relief, blessed assurance – we begin to be aware that our lives have changed.

We aren't sure how. We aren't sure why. But we know that somehow we will need to return, again, to that place where the star led us. The star that led us over alien and tricky terrain. The star of wonder. The star that guided us, and will guide us, to the perfect light.

Alleluia! Amen