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1/8/2017, The Epiphany and Baptism of Our Lord<sup>1</sup>  
Matthew 2:1-12, Matthew 3:13-17

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

...there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>Saying,  
Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have  
seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.  
(Matthew 2:1-2, KJV)

Most of the world looked up at the Epiphany star and took no notice of it. But the wise men in this morning's Bible reading, and the whole Church with them, look up at the Epiphany star and breathe a sigh of hope. That speck of light is the *beginning* of a great light.

Our First Lesson, from Isaiah 60, speaks of this great light. With boldness the old prophet announces to Israel:

Arise, shine; for your light has come... (Isaiah 60:1)

The high festival of the Epiphany of our Lord rejoices with the conviction that this prophecy begins to be fulfilled in the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem. We believe that that star shines for an even greater Light — indeed the very Light of this world, Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is a glorious sense of optimism about the Festival of the Epiphany. It may be too early to boast that darkness has been *banished* from this earth. But by the span of a star in the nighttime sky, we can say that light has *begun* on this dark earth.

Likewise with this morning's celebration of the Baptism of our Lord. We cannot yet say that all sin, suffering, and soiled human souls have been washed clean. But by the measure of the water that John the Baptist used with the baptism of Jesus, we can say that the cleansing of our earth has begun! A single star shines down on the infant Jesus. Thirty years later, a single measure of water is used to baptize Jesus. Compared to the infinity of the nighttime sky and the vastness of the wild oceans, what is a single star, and what is a single measure of water? Poor things, we may say. And yet the Church rejoices in the star over Bethlehem as the very *beginning* of light

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes these things happen to a preacher: the sermon you prepare and which seemed okay earlier in the week, just does not seem to be working as you draw closer to Sunday. This is one of those times. So, I have reworked sermons from years ago — chiefly from Epiphany Day 1998, with a little bit from Epiphany Day 1996. I think this reworked sermon is better than the sermon I wrote this past Wednesday.

overcoming darkness. And the Church rejoices in the measure of water poured out over Jesus as the very beginning fulfillment of Isaiah's shout of joy:

Though your sins be as scarlet, they *shall be washed* as white as snow.(Isa 1:18, KJV)

My goal for this sermon is that in this year of our Lord 2017, we will keep an image before our minds — the image of a steady journey toward Jesus, a journey like that of the wise men:

... behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,  
<sup>2</sup>Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. (Matthew 2:2, KJV)

May we be like these wise men of old, with steady step moving closer and closer toward Christ this coming year.

To do this, I offer one sentence that can be broken down into three points. The sentence goes this way:

To find Jesus this year, we must leave behind any darkness in our past, and find our Lord in the Church and in our neighbors.

The three points, then, are these: First, we must move on in life. Let us not be content with the way we were in 2016. Let us leave behind any darkness in our lives and gloominess in our souls. Let us move toward the Light of the world this year. Second, to find Jesus we cannot move randomly. We should seek him where he has promised to be: in the Church. And third, when we find Christ in the Church he will send us on another journey. This is a journey toward our neighbors, that we will be more kind to them this year and that we will do what we can to be stars for them, guiding them too toward Jesus.

So, first point: Let us go on a journey this year of our Lord 2017. The bumper sticker saying is true: Wise Men still seek Him! Wise men, along with wise women, boys, and girls, still seek Jesus! They seek, they search, they cannot rest at home in accustomed ways. Instead, they must set out on an adventure.

It is said that our heroes of this epiphany story were "wise" men, yet in this case, their wisdom would not help them if they lingered at home. They could stack their homes with books from floor to ceiling, but if they do not actually venture forth into what for them is a strange land, they cannot find Jesus. Their learning and their academic robes could not save them. Their

magic wands were irrelevant. The respect of their fellow citizens does not suffice for salvation. No. These Wise Ones had to get up and move on. They could not linger in their familiar ways. They had to journey, they had to travel across the sands and across the many miles. When their friends were staying at home, taking in a movie, they were out in the hills, drawing closer to the One before whom they will eventually bend the knee and worship.

Let us take their physical journey, then, to be an image for us of the conversion appropriate for anyone who would seek the Lord.

Consider, for example, the old Roman arena, with its violent spectacles. Maybe back then, it was considered acceptable for a gentleman or for a lady to take in an occasional lion attack on some poor slave. Or let's say, nothing was thought amiss even for a wise man to attend a battle of gladiators -- a battle that pressed on to the very death of one of them. Or suppose self-respecting Roman business people thought nothing of taking clients to strip bars, to permit the spell of license to ease the flow of transactions. Or suppose young Romans idled away the hours surfing the internet, surfing the book shops in search of racy stories, titillating pictures, thinking to themselves that they are harming no one, when in reality they are urging on both beautiful models and themselves into ever increasing darkness.

In all such cases, the words of the prophet are meant for anyone who would be wise:

ARISE, shine; for your light has come.

Arise, get out of the house, out of the club, out of the arena, out of the internet, out of the book shop. Get up on that camel and make a journey, for in the end, there is nothing back here save darkness -- a darkness that grows ever closer as your 70 years run their span.

So, that is the first point. Wise People must be prepared to make a journey. They must be prepared to repent, change the manner of their life, and press on to a new way of life.

Second, their path must head in the right direction. It is not enough simply to be a pilgrim. A Wise Man must journey toward one place in particular. Now, it is true that Jesus Christ fills all of heaven and earth.

He claims dominion over every place, he relinquishes nothing, he abandons not a single den on this earth, no matter how foul human sin may have made it. In the language of theology, Jesus Christ is omnipresent. But for all that, it does not mean that we can find Christ just anywhere. No. He has told us where we may find him. We may find him where two or three are gathered together in His name, which means, we may find him in church. And if you would have me point to the exact place in the church, I point to the Eucharist. Here is the One over whom the Epiphany star came to rest long ago. Here is the One who was with God, through whom all things were made, and without

whom nothing was made that was made. Right here! You will soon hear this Almighty One say to you, This is my body given for you. This is my blood shed for you.”

Just as it is avails little to linger at home, so it helps little to search endlessly for Jesus, but to miss him in the one place where he has promised to be, which is the church. So, if we would be wise people this year, we should hasten to church as often as we can.

But once we find Jesus in Church, he is going to send us on another journey. This is my third point. Jesus sends us out in search of our neighbors. Some of them are poor, some of them are sad. Some of them wonder whether they have the talent and wherewithal for their jobs. Some of them are lonely. Some of them have never really heard of Jesus or met anyone who resembled Jesus. Let us move toward them this year and try to help them. It is not good enough to somehow reverberate between home and church. There is also another journey awaiting us. It is a journey to our neighbors.

We might well remember Luther scolding the people of Wittenberg for imagining that they would have been kind enough to have helped Mary with baby Jesus. They would have lit the fire, washed the diapers, swept the room, tucked Mary and the Baby into warm blankets. Nonsense! said Luther. You have Jesus right here and now in your poor neighbor, yet you will not so much as cross an alley to help him.

So, lest we neglect Christ, let us lend a hand with our Meals on Heels program this year. There are frail elderly people in our neighborhood who needs a good meal on Saturdays. Let us pay our taxes fair and square, contributing to the commonwealth for the benefit of the frail and needy. In general, let us practice charity. Thereby, some have entertained angels unawares.

In the Epiphany story, the Wise Men go home after worshipping Jesus. And soon we shall go home too. But let us never go home in such a way that we stop being wise. Rather, in all our circumstances, whether at home, at work, or at play, let it be true of us that we are ever journeying toward Jesus, aiming for him in the Church and in our neighbors.

Arise, the prophet says. Arise, for your light has come. Let our daily journeys toward Jesus this year bring some light into our world and some glory to his name, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.