

We are gathered, by God, to worship on this 6th day of a brand new, never-before, unprecedented year, celebrating The Festival of the Epiphany...yet how much do we know about this Festival...how do we pronounce it properly...and why is it important? Good questions, all three! One of my continuing favorite memories related to this word comes from a Dayton, Ohio news broadcast when, on a very snowy weeknight the anchor woman said: 'All activities are cancelled this evening at Ippa-phanny Lutheran Church!'

In literary terms, an 'epiphany' is that moment in the story when a character achieves a realization, awareness, or knowledge of something, after which, all events are seen through his prism. But where is such an 'epiphany'...a realization or awareness to be experienced? The Wise Men want to know, asking '**Where** is the one who has been born king of the Jews?' King Herod called all the people together, asking '**where** the Messiah was to be born'. To this ruthless King any and all mention of some intruding king was intolerable, as he later demonstrates in what historically is called 'The Slaughter of the Innocents', systematically executed every boy in Judea, 2 years old and younger, in an effort to eliminate any rivals. This cold-hearted king does, though, offer one bit of wise guidance, as recorded in our Gospel lesson this morning: '*Go and search carefully for the child.*' [Mt. 2: 8] That instruction rings true today for all wise men and women, youth and children.

Jill and I recently attended a wonderful 2-hour Christmas program at a church just north of Columbus. As we sat among the 1500 or so in attendance, we were about one hour into the program when Mary and Joseph came into view, with Mary carrying a real, live infant in her arms. The silence of that moment was pierced by the innocent, near 'angelic', voice of a little boy [perhaps 4 or 5 years old] sitting behind me, as he 'loudly whispered' to his dad: 'Look

Dad, there's the baby!' I wanted to turn around and 'high five' the little boy, but chose otherwise as I overheard his father reply: 'I see him! Now shhh!' I can understand the father's concern about disrupting the Christmas program, but who can keep quiet once we find the Christ-child? **'Go and search carefully...'**

A few words about the Wise Men, or 'Magi' as they are called in Matthew's account. We don't have much historical information about them...Matthew records that they came *'from the east to Jerusalem'*, but precisely where *'from the east'* we don't know. Persia is a commonly accepted location. We, traditionally, comment that there were 3 Wise Men [based upon the three gifts they brought], but St. Matthew doesn't say there were 3 and the number of Wise Men has varied throughout the Church's history: 2, 3, 4, 8, and even 12! We have given them names...Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, but those names are not mentioned in The Bible and didn't come about until the 7th century A.D.

What the Wise Men saw and followed, described or identified in Scripture as *'the star'*, remains a bit of a mystery...options are a supernatural phenomenon, a regular star, a meteor, a comet, or a conjunction or grouping of planet. What we do know is the Wise Men saw something in the sky and, as they followed it, they arrived in Bethlehem...the exact address or house where Jesus and his parents were living. The Wise Men did exactly as King Herod had instructed, namely **'Go and search carefully for the child.'**

Epiphanies are those times, those gifts or voices or people or discoveries, that give us clarity and courage to travel beyond the oft-times chosen, restricting parameters of our daily lives...what, today, we refer to as 'our comfort zone'. Epiphanies are those times when something *calls* us, *moves* us, *leads* us to a new and yet undiscovered place in which we see the divine in a new, enlightening, and enriching way...so powerful, so clear and convincing, that we may find it hard to believe.

You and I are on a journey similar to that of the ancient men from *'the east'*, a journey that has already begun and brings us here this morning...a journey in which we receive guidance and direction from beyond ourselves and we experience joy and peace within ourselves. Your next epiphany may not be a star in the night sky, it may be the person sitting beside, in front, behind you, or across the sanctuary right now as I speak. It may be the next person you meet as you enter the remainder of this day...on the road, in a restaurant or store. Your epiphany may arrive in something you read or see, but perceived in a way you've not experienced before.

Whatever or whoever it is, ***'go and search carefully'***. This requires 'movement' and being 'careful' in our 'search'. We do well to follow the example of these ancient wise men from the east, as *'they saw the star and followed it...they were overjoyed...they saw the child...they bowed down and worshiped him...they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts...'* and then they were on their way back home, divinely different than when they had left home to find the baby they so-longed to know. Amen.