

What an honour it is to be here with you today. It's an auspicious day, after all, as we observe the Epiphany on this the first Sunday in a new year! Epiphany, with its overarching themes of faith, optimism, revelation, and hope, is an opportunity for every preacher in a pulpit to set the tone for the year to come. Is it any wonder that this is traditionally the time for new resolutions? And without going into the statistical probability of our actually keeping our New Year's resolutions—none of us need to have our parade rained on— isn't it enough, just for this moment, to think about what we'd dearly love to see, and what we'd like to be in the world of the next 12 months and beyond?

The truth is, most of our resolutions—whether for self-improvement or making the world a better place—end up being unrealistic and all but impossible to accomplish. Real change takes time and diligent effort and if it's going to stick, it often has to happen in tiny, almost imperceptible stages. That's what real people like you and me are like. But, as we see in the Epiphany, that's not what God's like.

Now, I don't mean to overly generalize, or give in to cynicism, but from the beginning, the people of God kinda schlepped through the centuries, constantly and continually ignoring and/or misinterpreting the word and will of God they received from the prophets. If anything in human nature fundamentally changed, it only did so very slowly and in tiny increments, it seemed, and the rest of creation just ticked along and did its best to adapt to humanity's growth, in numbers and technology. Then God decided it was time for something new, and with the birth of Christ, *everything* changed, and that all of a sudden.

The prophets had foretold the birth of a messiah, but human nature meant most people probably doubted it would ever come true. Human nature also meant that those who believed the prophecies were bound to develop their own concept of what the promised messiah would look like, and what he would do to save them from their present troubles. This is why I reckon the Epiphany we're commemorating today was something that happened not just to the wise men from the east—not just to the Gentiles, as it's traditionally framed, but to every Jew who

heard the wise men ask, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” And the Epiphany, like the birth of Christ and the Resurrection, is likewise still happening today.

The gospel we just heard describes how, with the arrival of the wise men from the east and their quest, King Herod “was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him.” Of course, we can understand why Herod was afraid—any sovereign would be unsettled by news of a potential rival to the throne—but why were the people frightened? Surely when the wise men uttered the phrase, ‘the king of the Jews’ the people should have been overjoyed; this was a well-recognized code phrase for the long-awaited messiah. The advent of the king of the Jews should have been good news, shouldn’t it? The truth of the matter, though, is that when a king is afraid, he’s liable to become unstable, and both Herod’s fear and consequent instability was very likely to roll downhill and cause problems, even chaos for his subjects in a time when they were already struggling under the rule of the Roman emperor and his legions.

The chief priests and elders were likewise unsettled; what an affront it must’ve been to them, to be forced re-examine texts they’d all read numerous times, only to find something they’d either overlooked or misunderstood. How galling it must’ve been for them to hear the birth of the messiah announced by foreigners—and Gentile foreigners! —and not only to find the truth borne out in the scriptures, but to then be compelled to acknowledge it to serve Herod, a collaborating client king to the Romans. Finally, to add insult to injury, rather than sending a delegation of Jerusalem’s holy men as his emissaries, Herod encouraged these selfsame Gentile foreigners to seek out the messiah and report back.

Friends, the secular definition of an epiphany is “a sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something.” In other words, when we experience an epiphany, it’s a startling revelation of truth. The young folks today have a wonderful facility for describing certain things; they’d say when the wise men pulled up, they dropped an atomic ‘truth bomb’ in Jerusalem. It would be apt to put it that way, as the reality of Jesus’s birth exploded in the face of King Herod and the chief priests and elders, and the fireball continued to grow as Jesus shook

the foundations of the religious, cultural, and political power structures throughout Israel and Judea in his subsequent earthly life and ministry.

Today, the conflagration of the epiphany is ongoing and unabated, as each new believer is presented with the startling revelation of our Emmanuel—God with us—not simply looking down dispassionately from on high, and not just floating around us in the air like this infernal virus. God—almighty and all-powerful, and at the same time so very close and personal to each of us. God with us and God within us. Today, all creation points to Jesus our Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life,” and the pillars of earthly power continue to shake.

So the epiphany isn’t simply a quaint fable portrayed in paintings of exotic kings presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to a baby with a halo embossed on a Christmas card. Friends, the star at its rising was the sign of God’s reign physically and tangibly come to earth. The epiphany experienced by the Magi, the startling revelation of truth to these wise men from the east, as they saw the Christ-child and his mother compelled them to drop to their knees and present their gifts. Their oblation prefigured our own service of worship, praise, and thanksgiving this very morning. May the gifts we bring to Him today—our whole heart and soul, all our strength, and every thought in our minds—may these, our gifts, meagre though they may be, befit the King of heaven *and* earth who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen? Amen.