

The Feast of the Epiphany:
A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger
on January 4, 2026

Isaiah 60:1-6 / Ephesians 3:1-12 / Psalm 72:1-7,10-14 / Matthew 2:1-12

*Arise, shine, for your light has come.
The Glory of the Lord has risen upon you.*

The drama continues! If you were here a couple of weeks ago when I compared Joseph's story to a Hallmark Christmas movie, you will understand when I say *the drama continues*. The Christmas story that we know and love is one of high drama, and it gets more dramatic with every new scene. The story of the Wise Men injects more drama ... and there's a lot more to come!

The high drama in the story of the Wise Men is of course the meddling of King Herod. A leader with a fragile ego felt threatened by an infant, so he tried to use the Wise Men as agents to find the child he was so threatened by. And when that didn't work, he had all the children under the age of 2yo in and around Bethlehem killed! That dramatic story is reserved for December 28, the Feast of the Holy Innocents. And we would be remiss if we were not to see the parallel of that story with our own modern story of children being separated from their parents. What messianic message are we missing in our contemporary version of The Holy Innocents?

But there is even more drama in the few sentences of the Wise Men's story. They bring gifts, but they are not just ordinary gifts – they are gifts with such deep theological significance that only the most well-educated of Matthew's community of mostly Jewish Christians would have understood. Matthew's detractors – the Scribes and Pharisees – would have also understood the significance of the gifts:

- Gold signifying Jesus' royalty as King of Kings;
- Frankincense signifying Jesus' divinity; and

- Myrrh foreshadowing Jesus' Death on the Cross.

And that leads to another bit of drama in the story of the Wise Men: these gifts indicate that the Wise Men *knew* the Baby Jesus to be the Jewish Messiah ... and they weren't even Jewish! They were from the East; they would have been followers of other faiths; yet they were drawn to make a very perilous journey from the East to seek out this child of a God they didn't follow. And unlike those who seek Jesus when He's an adult, the Wise Men do not stay with Him and follow Him; they go home. So, one of the most significant aspects of this story is that non-Jews were the first to recognize the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus was the Christ to not only the Jews, but to the world, *from the very beginning!*

And that's my jumping off point this morning: Outsiders recognized the Christ in Jesus from the very beginning. What does that mean for us today?

In the Baptismal Covenant that some of you renewed last week and we will renew again next week, we are asked if we will: *seek and serve Christ in all persons*. We talk about seeing Jesus in all whom we meet. But do we think about that for ourselves? I could have you turn to the person closest to you and look for the Christ in that person, and you would make an effort to do that.

But what if I asked you to look in the mirror and see the Christ within yourself? I would bet that most of you would find that a bit more difficult. Self-reflection is uncomfortable, and we usually don't undertake any sort of self-reflection until our issues are so desperate that we seek professional help. Seeking and serving the Christ within yourself doesn't require professional help.

Though, seeking and serving the Christ within yourself may be enabled by outsiders, like the Wise Men. Maybe others can help you understand that Mystery of Christ for yourself, help the Mystery of Christ be made known. This is known in church-y circles as discernment.

Discernment comes in several forms, and it is a process I believe in strongly for all persons. But it is mostly associated with those discerning a vocation to ordained ministry. Discernment within the ordination process can be very rigorous. It typically includes individual discernment, community discernment, and church-wide discernment. Please allow me a few moments to describe that process of discernment to you.

- Individual discernment starts with listening for what God is calling you to. It can be a cataclysmic realization that you are called to serve God's people within the structures of the Church. Or it can be a gradual movement along your spiritual journey that eventually includes ordination. Or it can be something in between. At some point, this individual discernment includes an ordained leader, usually your priest, and when you decide to formally discern a call to ordination, individual discernment definitely involves your parish priest.
- Community discernment can happen a couple of different ways. When I first went through the ordination process here in the Diocese of El Camino Real, community discernment was with a shepherding group made up of members of your parish with whom you met regularly to discuss what was going on for you spiritually and with your call to ordination. They helped you discern that call as they looked for the Christ within you. When I went through the process in the Church of England, community discernment was with a very perceptive and probing person chosen by the Diocese to evaluate whether or not the Christ within you is leading you to ordination. Fast-forward to now in the Diocese of El Camino Real, and the community discernment is done with either a Deanery shepherding group or a group selected by the Commission on Ministry to accompany you on that reflection.
- The Church's discernment is the final step in the process. Here in the Diocese of El Camino Real, that happens at a series of meetings with the Commission on Ministry. Back in 2000, it was a weekend with the Commission on Ministry. And in the Church of England, it was a very intense and intimidating weekend at a remote lodge with 15 others from

across England going through the same thing and 3 evaluators selected by the Church of England to fulfill one task: Tell your bishop whether or not you are priest material!

That's all pretty intense and takes years. And it's right and proper for someone seeking Holy Orders. But discerning the Christ in oneself shouldn't end with whether or not one is selected for ordination or when one is ordained. I have long believed that discernment is a lifelong process. In both Paul's letter to the Ephesians and the story of the Wise Men, we can see that they, too, believed that discernment is a lifelong process.

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.

Clearly Paul is still thinking about what his role in serving Christ is. And as he gets older, his writings indicated his own self-reflection and his discernment of where the true Christ is for him.

The mere fact that the Wise Men followed the star and made the journey to Bethlehem is a clear indication that, not only were they seeking and serving the Christ, they had discerned a call that had come later in life, perhaps something they had been discerning for decades but only then at that time and in that place understood what it was.

And so, we come to you. How can you seek and serve the Christ within yourself?

In the Diocese of El Camino Real when we had a Canon for Lay Ministry, there used to be discernment for Lay Ministry. There were semi-formal opportunities to discuss what service to Christ through the Church meant to you. And more formally, a person could go through the same process as someone discerning a call to ordination and do that deep 3-level discernment of their call to Lay Ministry, whether that be preaching, teaching, Altar Guild, Youth Ministry or

Church Governance. It was a way to seek, serve and *affirm* the Christ within the laity. The Church affirms in the Catechism that:

The ministry of lay persons is to represent Christ and His Church; to bear witness to Him wherever they may be; and, according to the gifts given them, to carry on Christ's work of reconciliation in the world; and to take their place in the life, worship, and governance of the Church.

There are also less intimidating ways to seek the Christ within you, different ways of discernment. Many people have a Spiritual Director. I see mine every 6 to 8 weeks and explore how I'm showing Christ to others in my ministry or how I am falling short of seeking and serving the Christ in others.

A retreat, either individual, guided or group, can be very helpful. I have written about my personal retreat before. There are many different ways and places to undertake a retreat. And I would be more than happy to discuss that with you.

But then there's the easy-yet-frightening way to explore the Christ within yourself: *ask those who know you the most: In what ways do you see Christ within me?*

These are all forms of the Wise Men who saw Jesus, The Messiah, The Christ...forms in which the Wise Men are for you in today's world to explore the Christ within you.

The drama in Jesus' Birth Narratives continues in today's story of the Wise Men from the East. And we have to remember that their story is *our* story – their story is *your* story, because the Story of Jesus is the story of your Salvation. And Jesus is the Messiah yesterday, today and forever – not just for that moment in the Gospels.

From today's story that we hold precious in our faith, in the life of our worship and in the Nativity Scenes in our homes, we can learn how it is relevant to us today and how we each are truly a part of the Body of Christ.

As I implore you to seek and serve the Christ within yourself, as I implore you to undertake some personal discernment, let me leave you with the last part of v3 and all of v4 of a well-known Christmas Carol:

*where meek souls will receive Him still,
the dear Christ enters in.*

*4 O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*