

# WILL THIS BE A NEW YEAR, OR JUST ANOTHER?

**Sunday, January 2, 2005**  
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What does God reveal to us in Epiphany? Epiphany I have found is a part of the Christmas story that is often overlooked. But I would like to remind you this morning that the birth of the Baby Jesus is only part of the whole of the Christmas story. For when we look at the larger story, we are better able to understand the meaning of life. And we are better able to understand what the world is really like. The whole of the story teaches us about God, and what He is like, and He relates to each and every one of us, and to His world. It also reminds and teaches us how we are to respond to God's presence and actions in our world.

We first hear in the Christmas story that life is filled with light, with miracles, with glory, and angels and stars. We hear about people looking for stars for guidance, those seeking wisdom. We also learn of a man and a woman about to have a baby. And when we look at the details of this story, when we look inside the simplicity, we learn that the people in the story are not very different from each us. Are they? For we at times have been looking for wisdom, and we at times have been expecting a baby. We find that we are really more connected than we ever thought, and we find that we are very important in the Christmas story and in the story of life.

But secondly, as we read into the drama of the Christmas story, we hear that the world is not always a safe and peaceful place. The world is filled with dangers, filled with darkness, and filled with Herod. The world is filled with horrors of war, terrorism, the scourges of addiction, abuse, poverty, crime, homelessness, the evils of greed, prejudice, economic exploitation, and cruel indifference. And still after all these years since the Christmas story began, evil is present and real, and here in our lives.

And into this world, this world of evil and this world of life, comes to be with us Emmanuel. God in the Christmas story reveals himself to us, and He comes and says to us, "Peace and good-will be among you". God enters into this world as the Christ Child, with gifts for each of us of love and forgiveness. He hopes to guide us and help us to move forward. For God is the life of the world. As "logos", the word revealing what is true, exposing what is false, God still relates to the world as He did to Joseph, Mary, and the Wise Men.

God still, even though we still don't always want to believe it, speaks to us through dreams, visions, and voices. God is the kind of god who relates to this world by actively seeking us out, by speaking to our hearts, by shedding light on our paths, revealing truth, spreading love, calling for peace.

January sixth is known in the western Christian tradition as Epiphany. And epiphany is the climax of the Christmas season. The twelve days of Christmas, as you've heard them sing in contemporary carols. But we don't celebrate in the Christian church Christmas as just being one day. It's a season. And the term "epiphany" means "to show, to make known or to reveal". And on epiphany, we remember the coming of the Wise Men, who brought the gifts to the Christ Child. And epiphany represents newness and hope.

I don't know if you know this, but the Wise Men, who came bearing their gifts and who eventually came to worship the infant Jesus, were the first gentiles to acknowledge Jesus as king. And so were the first to show or reveal that Jesus came to a wider world as the Incarnate Christ. And this act of worship of the Magi is one of the first indications that Jesus came for all people, not just for the Jews, for people of all nations and races. And the work of God in the world would be limited not to just a few.

The Feast of the Epiphany celebrates a turning point in the early church, because up until that time, the church was entirely composed of Jews. And the Epiphany celebrates the church's realization that the Messiah, the Christ, God's Anointed One, belongs not just to them but to all. In response to the Epiphany before us, how do we respond? For God is with us, Emmanuel, Christ the Child is born.

What is so special about the story of the Magi is not only were they the first gentiles to worship Christ, but when they were there, when they encountered Him, once they met Him, and in worshiping Him, that they were changed. For they went home by another road, listening to a powerful dream, they avoided Herod and went home a different way.

I don't know if you've ever been there, actually after the first service somebody came up and said they were there, but in Fort Lauderdale at the First Baptist Church, they have a very powerful live Christmas pageant. Have you even been to one? They have camels and sheep, and donkeys and horses. I know Jo has been out to the Crystal Cathedral where they have something similar, but it's absolutely amazing to be there. I mean you've heard the story told for years, and you've seen little Nativity creches, and perhaps maybe watched something on TV, but to actually experience this live pageant is very, very powerful. And songs are sung by the characters of Jesus and Mary and of Joseph. And angels come down from these cables in the sky, and are hanging above you with their robes and their wings, and they're singing as if they were the Heavenly Host. I'll be honest with you. It's actually one of the most powerful experiences I've ever had, emotionally and spiritually, the first time I saw it as a little child.

But one thing when I saw it recently spoke more powerfully than before. It had to do with the Magi. For when the kings appeared, the first one came from the far right of the sanctuary, and he was dressed in green. And he was surrounded with a whole caravan, and he was carried, with men carrying him, and horses surrounding him. And he came all dressed in the majesty of a king, and brought forth his gifts of gold. And from another

direction in the sanctuary, came another king and with him dressed, of course, all in red came this whole wonderful entourage of people. And they carried him forward in his majesty. Then lastly from the middle of the church way at the back came the last of the three Magi, dressed in purple, bringing with him his gifts of myrrh. And the music was dramatic and powerful, and the three kings came forward. And they got there before the Baby Jesus, a real infant baby. And they got up there, and they stood right in front of him, and this big huge robe was set out before the last of the kings. And I thought to myself, these are majestic people. They are who we use to bow down to, kings, right? And all at once, all three of these big, huge, powerful majestic creatures together went all the way down on their knees before a Baby Jesus.

It came to me at that moment as I watched those Three Wise Men that what made them wise was in their recognition of who was truly the King of Kings. And this encounter with the Christ Child changed them, humbled them, and changed their lives forever. In the birth of this child, God reveals himself to us and comes into our hearts and molds us, if we are willing, to be who He would have us to be.

And so I ask you this 2005 year, how will you respond to the newness of this year? How will you respond to God's gift of Christ in your own heart. Through God's revelation in the Christmas story, we are given the gift of hope. What else could we ever ask for? And like the shepherds watching the skies, and like the Wise Men following the star, and like the prophets in the temples who believed in the coming of a Messiah; and like Mary and Joseph waiting for voices and dreams; we too must call upon the Christ Child to come into our hearts anew. We must recognize this Baby Jesus as the King of Kings.

As Christians we respond to the whole of the story with the gifts of our lives. We offer the gifts we have to give as the Wise Men did; the gifts of our time, our concern, our talents, our hard work, and our money. Because we don't go away from this experience, if we are truly changed, and sit still for the rest of our lives. We go forward by responding, by caring enough to make a difference in the world. And looking back on the Christmas story, we do not see idleness, we see action. Although intimidated at first, Mary eventually willingly gave in to God's plan to carry Baby Jesus. Joseph, who had been engaged to a woman with child, not his, remains engaged to her and marries her. The Wise Men followed the star, they moved. The shepherds came. People acted; they did something. They moved. And they went away changed.

How will you act in response to meeting the Christ Child anew this Christmas? Perhaps you can act on your faith by feeding the homeless, or reaching out to those in your midst who have recently lost a loved one. Perhaps you can give generously to someone you know in need, or perhaps you can work to bring justice to the alienated and the forgotten.

We can't get through this sermon without remembering the victims of the tsunami. All over south Asia, death in massive numbers has become a harsh reality. We cannot even imagine the devastation that they would feel. We've gone around the last few days saying, "Happy New Year". But is it a happy new year for these victims? Governmental authorities in southeast Asia in response to a death toll of more than 130,000, I think it's maybe up to 140,000 now, cancelled celebrations to mark the new year, and instead called out to every person to instead worship and pray.

And even though we know that death is a biological fact of life, even though we know it's coming, when we see those rows and rows of dead bodies, it's just devastating. And it seems that the numbers are so high, that how can any one person recall all of the names. My friends, even though as humans we may not know all the names of those who have been lost, I can tell you of someone who does. God knows each and everyone of those people, and their names. Emmanuel, God With Us. God came into this world for such a time as this. And as the old Christmas carol says, "Jesus Christ was born for this".

We celebrate Christmas because we live in a world full of death, and now we encounter one who has come to give us life. We celebrate Christmas not to escape the hard realities of the times, but One has come who has overcome the hardest of hard times. Who offers freely to all who seek Him a lasting victory over sin and death, and a way to live now in the world that makes true the reality that God so loved the world that he sent us His only Son.

We celebrate Christmas because even the bad news is news that God can use and does use everything to fulfill his purpose. God's purpose is not thwarted by evil. Isaiah spoke to the people of this time, "Arise, shine for your Light has come, and the glory of the Lord is upon us".

If you do go a new way this year, where will you go? What happens year after year, and how do you need a new year this Christmas? For you are the only one who can decide that. It's more of an attitude really. I mean perhaps you lost someone dear to you this year, and it will be a difficult year. Perhaps you are a teenager who doesn't get along very well with your parents. Perhaps you are a spouse fighting with the other one. Or perhaps you are very ill and are worried about tomorrow. How will this be a new year for you?

There's a new country song that I really like. Yes, I did go, as Feild mentioned to Auburn, Alabama for my collegiate education. So I came to love country music. I mean how can you go to Alabama and not come out liking that. Martina McBride has a beautiful song, and it's called "God's Will". Has anybody heard it yet? Anyway, in the song she talks about how she met God's Will on a Halloween night. He was a little young boy dressed up as a bag of leaves who came to her house. And the costume at first hid the braces on his legs. And his smile, she says, was as bright as the August sun. And

at first, she responded to meeting Will with hurt in her heart because she watched him struggle as he walked down the walkway. And it pained her to see him hurt. And she realized how other kids in his school and his neighborhood might not treat him the same. And she sings about how she has been searching, wondering, thinking, lost and looking, all of her life, and how she has been wounded, jaded, loved, and hated. And how she has spent many day wrestling with what is wrong and what is right. Will's mom had to raise her son on her on, so Martina says she helped watch him one night when his mom was working. And she said they had a great time together. That they laughed, and they ate good food. And Will would always raise his hand, and say "I want to say the prayers. I want to say the prayers". And he would pray the prayer, and he would pray for his mom, and the woman in the song, he would pray for the neighborhood, and never once mention himself in any of his prayers.

One day Will and his mother had to move to California. And Martina sings in the song about how Will wasn't thought to live very long. And the mother said as she was leaving, "Each day I have him, well it's just another day". But at the end of the song, it reveals how Will changed the author. Because the boy showed her the truth on a notebook piece of paper, where he wrote down before he left, "Me and God love you". And Martina ends the song saying "I've been searching, praying, wounded, jaded; I guess I would be still, yes, that was until I met God's Will".

What we are really talking about is being changed this new year and being made new is about our relationship with Jesus Christ. Because we can certainly make many efforts to change our lives for the better. We can go on diets in 2005; we can keep in touch with our loved ones; we can be more faithful in our church attendance; we can give more generously; we can certainly say and do a lot of things differently. But what is most important is how we relate to Jesus Christ. And as you come to this table today, I want you to ask yourself what will you bring as your most holy gift. Will you hold back, or will you let fears run your directions? Or will you come to this table and yield before Baby Jesus. Come unto Him; come learn about Him and His love for you. May you leave this worship transformed and be new for the new year.

Our God is a god of new beginnings. He can help us to believe the words of Paul, who says to us, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old is passed away; everything has become new". May you be like the Wise Men this 2005 and go home by another way, for now and forevermore. Amen.

This sermon was presented by the pastor from a brief outline and not from a written manuscript. It was transcribed from audiotape and edited by individuals other than the pastor who claims authorship. Said pastor did not necessarily read this transcript before publication.

