Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12; Epiphany (B); January 11, 2009

“EPHANPY IS JUST FULL OF SURPRISES!”
+ In Nomine Jesu +

It’s Thursday, November 27, 2003, Thanksgiving Day. 600 U.S. soldiers are spending it away from their families. They’ve gathered in a mess hall in Baghdad Intl. Airport. They’re expecting to hear a speech by then chief U.S. administrator Paul Bremer, and then file up for some Thanksgiving chow.

As expected, Bremer gets up and says he’s going to read a Thanksgiving proclamation from the President. He’s about to start but pauses, because he says it’s customary for the most senior official present to read the President’s address. “Is there anybody back there who’s more senior?” he asks. That’s when President Bush comes out from behind a curtain to give his speech in person. Surprise!

The soldiers are stunned in the most delighted way. And that Thanksgiving day was more full of surprises yet. After his speech, President Bush did KP, “Kitchen Patrol.” He put on his apron and helped serve the 600 soldiers their Thanksgiving meal. “I thought it was important to send the message that we care,” he said, knowing that nothing says “I care” like a personal visit.

But, of course, President Bush is a patriot and a politician. He understands, better than most, the importance of building morale and approval. So, his surprise visit to the troops on Thanksgiving Day of 03 is not so surprising after all. What is surprising, utterly stunning, is God coming down from heaven and making a personal visit to this world that wishes he didn’t exist and wants nothing to do with him. He comes because he cares for this world anyway and wants to save it, and nothing says “I care” like a personal visit. So, surprise! “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us!”

Well, today we celebrate the Epiphany, the Revealing. Revealing of what? What does Epiphany reveal? That the flesh and blood child of Mary is the Word! Epiphany is the revealing of Christ’s glory as God and Savior of this hateful, messed up world. And so, you can believe this, you can expect this: today’s festival of the Epiphany and the coming season of Epiphany will be just full of surprises!

I.

Look at the surprising, staggering things for us, already in the first two verses of our Gospel: 1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

It’s not spoken in the English translation before us, but the Holy Spirit inspired Matthew to write a little word that in Greek sounds like this: “ldou!” That’s the Holy Spirit’s way of saying, “Surprise! Look closely at this amazing, unexpected thing!” So, what is the you-gotta-be-kidding-me thing in these two verses? ...That these Magi saw Christ’s glory!! How in the world did that happen? Think about it: Holy God did not make a flashy appearance. He wasn’t born in one of the great metropolises of the day--Jerusalem, Rome, or Athens. He was born in “Podunk” Palestine--“Bethlehem in Judaea.” Bethle-who? a Roman or Athenian might ask. God is born in Israel not when it was at the height of its power, you know, in the days of King David or King Solomon. He’s born in Israel when it was totally stripped of its former power and glory, “in the days of King Herod.” Baby Jesus’ divine glory is more hidden, more secret than President Bush’s plan to visit the troops on Thanksgiving of 03. So, even though the shepherds on Christmas and Simeon and Anna eight days later in the Temple announced the good news of great joy, God has gone largely undetected even by his own people. Mary and Joseph have been carrying baby-God in their arms for eighteen months to two years in Bethlehem, and no one in that village has apparently noticed. Otherwise, why don’t we hear of any “Bethlehemites” coming to worship him? So how did these Magi know of the birth of the Christ when it was so hidden? How did they know this
new star was “his star,” that signified his birth? Sure, they were wise, highly educated, men. But they were Gentiles living a thousand miles away from Israel and the promises of Christ!

You think that’s surprising, let me throw this at you: the Magi not only saw the Light of Israel. They saw...their Light! Don’t you see? They traveled literally a thousand miles just to see Jesus and give him gifts and worship because they had made “the one born king of the Jews”...their King, their Savior!!! But how? Like the rest of humanity, they were born as Isaiah said in the First Lesson: “covered in darkness...thick darkness.” They were born hating God. You can see the thick dark natures of the Magi in Herod, most of Jerusalem, and even Israel's pastors. They who should have been the first to see Christ’s glory as Savior when the shepherds and Simeon and Anna told them don’t see it at all! How do Herod and the people react at news that the king of the Jews has been born? With joy and praise? No! With ignorance and fear! Verse 3: “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” Not knowing what he’s really hearing--news of his Savior from sin--Herod imagines a rival king to his earthly throne. He’s frightened and furious. And so are the people because they’re thinking the same thing: “Great, a rival king! Herod’s already murdered his own wife and her sons to cut off a rival blood-line. This nut is going to go on a rampage.” And, of course, they’re right. Herod calls in the religious leaders and the Magi to find out when and where the promised Messiah was born...so that he can assassinate his own Savior before he has a chance to grow up and save him! “Thick darkness!” And how about Israel’s pastors. They knew God’s Word outwardly to a “T.” When Herod calls them in and asks where the promised Messiah was to be born, there’s no debate, no, hesitation. Quicker than a Jeopardy champion buzzing in the answer to Alex Trebek, they answer, “What is Bethlehem in Judea? This is what the Bible says.” But then why don’t they run to Bethlehem to see the fulfillment of the Scriptures? Because they don’t believe the Scriptures! Thick darkness! This is the natural human condition.

So, you see, what is most surprising of all, don’t you? Not just how the Magi saw the glory of Christ as Savior, but how on earth have we? Jesus’ dazzling glory is completely hidden beneath the lowliness of words, water, bread and wine that are often rejected and taken for granted. And, of course, we too were born in the same thick darkness as Herod, the citizens of Jerusalem, the priests, and the Magi. The darkness seeps out of us, at times. We know better. We know God’s Word. But our hearts burn with anger and envy at those we feel get in the way of what we want. We cover up our sins of not doing the good we know we should do, with veneers of rightness, excuses, and even lies. “They need to learn a lesson.” “I’m busy. Maybe tomorrow.” We sometimes excuse instead of confess our evil whenever we blame something or someone else. This is all Herod-like hate of the Christ-child. We sin in all the ways we do because by birth we don’t fear, love, and trust in God not to! And every laziness and dullness we show toward God’s Word, every quick surrender to the particular temptations that plague us--impatience, lust, worry--is the modern version of priests and teachers of the law not running to see Christ. Though we know what God’s Word says about sin and what it cost God to cleanse us from it, we are not taking it seriously enough to confess our sins and receive forgiveness.

So, again, how has each of us wise people, wise unto salvation, come to say with the Magi, “I have seen his star and have come to worship him”? This is the stunning unsolved mystery of grace we will spend eternity pondering in grateful praise. “Lord, why do you love me so much that you gave me your Son, revealed him to me, and by this saved me for you? Why?” “Because my love for you, like my very life, does not depend on you or anything else,” he says, “My love depends all on me, and I am love! So, before I made you, before I made the ground you stand on, I determined to rejoice over you like a groom over his bride forever! I sent my Son in the flesh to live a life of perfect light to cover every square inch of your darkness and then to be covered in the thick darkness of my anger against sin, so you never would be. And I made sure nothing stood in my Son’s way from cleansing you and my Spirit’s way from making you mine!” And we see exactly this “you-gotta-be-kidding-me” love of our Father here. Herod had the opportunity to do as he wanted: murder Jesus. All he had to do was send a company of soldiers with the Magi or some spies behind them. So why didn’t he? Trust me, if I can think of it, it obviously doesn’t take a genius to figure out. Why did Herod send the Magi off alone, so that Jesus ended up escaping? Because in his love for us God works behind the scenes to make sure our Savior grows up to live and die for us! And why didn’t the Magi get discouraged and head back home when they encountered nothing but ignorance and fear in Jerusalem? And when the star led them not to a king’s palace but a peasant’s house, and they were met by a lowly mom and her lowly two-year old, how come they’re not
confused or offended? There’s no, “Oops, sorry, we got the wrong house. We’re looking for a king.” No, seeing the glory Bethlehem and Jerusalem missed, “they were overjoyed...and they bowed down and worshiped him” and gave him gifts. The Magi remained determined to find Christ and were not disappointed by his lowliness when they found him, because by his promises, the Holy Spirit sparked and sustained the light of faith to see Christ. By this same Word the Spirit has done the same for you and me. So, surprise...even we have seen his star!

II.

We are stunned in the most delighted way we can be. But EPIPHANY IS JUST FULL OF SURPRISES! In the very grace to know Christ, is always the grace to make him known!

We see this stunning grace in the Magi. How did they know that the coming king of the Jews was their king? God gave some of the OT Jews scattered to the eastern lands the grace he had given to Paul: “to preach to the gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Through his lowly, weak people God revealed the light of his Word to the Magi. So when Messiah came the Magi recognized him and ran to him in faith with gifts and praise. Then, it was the Magi's turn to receive the grace to tell. Look closely at v. 2: They don't ask, “Has a king of the Jews been born?” But “Where is the king of the Jews?” In other words, “A Savior has been born to you. Where is he?”

And, of course, the most surprising thing of all: now it's our turn. We who see Christ have been given the grace to show Christ. God has given us a share of the grace he gave Paul to tell people about their Savior and unlock the storeroom of Christ's riches--God's love, God's peace, God's eternal kingdom--that are otherwise “unsearchable.” Yes, that means the surprising thing you think it means: even though Christ's majestic glory is hidden beneath our weakness and unworthiness, our feeble efforts and stammering tongues, yet it is revealed through us! Through St. John well over 300 people have been baptized and over 150 confirmed. And, of course, each of us has come to worship Christ and live forever in part because the people next to us have shined his light in song, liturgy, and word!

During the 2008 presidential race, John McCain was asked by Time magazine to share his "personal journey of faith." This is what he said: "When I was a prisoner of war in Vietnam...my captors would tie my arms behind my back and then loop the rope around my neck and ankles so that my head was pulled down between my knees. I was often left like that throughout the night. One night a guard came into my cell. He put his finger to his lips signaling for me to be quiet and then loosened my ropes to relieve my pain. The next morning, when his shift ended, the guard returned and retightened the ropes, never saying a word to me...A month or so later, on Christmas Day, I was standing in the dirt courtyard when I saw that same guard approach me. He walked up and stood silently next to me, not looking or smiling at me. Then he used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. We stood wordlessly looking at the cross, remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp."

So, Epiphany is just full of surprises. You wouldn’t expect a Vietnamese guard in a POW camp to see or show the light of Christ. But he did! You would expect even less that we should see and show the light of Christ. And yet, surprise! Even we have seen his star! Wow! Not only did God turn enemies, too many to count, into sons at the cost of his Son, he did this for you and me! Otherwise, God would never have sent his Son to our world and made sure his Word made it to us. Wow! Even though God already possesses all, he delights in the gifts we bring as if it was just what he needed. And surprise again! Even we get to show his star! Wow! God achieves his eternal purpose in us: to turn the diamond of his grace showing off all its glorious facets...And angels are stunned! Amen.