

# A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration

BY MICHAEL J. GLINGENPEEL

**“The whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration,” Augustine wrote in his sermon on Epiphany in 412. Sixteen hundred years later, Augustine’s sermon on the Magi reminds us of important Epiphany truths.**

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**E**piphany, January 6, marks the culmination of the Christmas season. It also begins the season after Epiphany, which runs until Ash Wednesday. When he was minister at The Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard University, Peter J. Gomes delivered a sermon in which he described Epiphany as “the most important season in the church’s year.”<sup>1</sup>

This was not my experience growing up. I was raised Southern Baptist, which is to say I grew up liturgically-challenged. We lit candles to depict progress toward the Lottie Moon Offering goal, processed down the aisle to place our pledge cards on the Communion table, and the closest we came to a creed was recitation of the church covenant from the back of the *Baptist Hymnal*. Christmas and Easter were big deals, as were Promotion Sunday, Pledge Day, and Thanksgiving. American culture and Nashville set our church calendar.

It was a healthy tradition in which I heard the call of God. It prepared me for a lifetime of ministry among Baptists in the South. Eventually, however, I came to learn that I swam head down in a narrow creek and never noticed flowing nearby a wide river whose headwaters started long ago and far away. This powerful river had channels both East and West, which in places merged and separated, and had overlooks called Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Pentecost. Along this river I encountered names like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Wesley. This river has borne me along, no less than I was transported

early by Annie Armstrong, Lottie Moon, and E.Y. Mullins. I am grateful.

Now I know that Christmas does not end on the evening of December 25, that the Wise Men did not show up in Bethlehem within twenty-four hours of Jesus' birth, and that God is made known to us wherever we are, here and now, as there and then. "Epiphany," which means manifestation or showing forth, is the word for what happened at Bethlehem and in the weeks, months, and years following. It happens still.

Epiphany, and the season after it, is important. To understand why, we turn to Epiphany's roots. The feast of Epiphany was first celebrated in the fourth century. It recalls three events in which Jesus was made known: the manifestation of Jesus' birth to the Magi, representing the Gentiles (Matthew 2:1-12), the announcement of Jesus' identity at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22), and Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine at the Cana wedding feast (John 2:1-11).<sup>2</sup>

Epiphany entered the life of the Church in an age of great preaching. Important preachers included John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Pope Leo I, and Augustine.

On Epiphany in 412, Augustine delivered a sermon on the account, unique to Matthew, of the revelation of the birth of Jesus to the Magi and their subsequent journey to Bethlehem bearing gifts. He described Epiphany as a "noteworthy celebration...throughout the world." He added that "the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration."<sup>3</sup>

Sixteen hundred years later, Augustine's sermon on the Magi reminds us of three Epiphany truths.

First, Epiphany helps us recall that our world is not bereft of God's presence. God leaves hints and signs, a trail to be discovered by those who seek to pursue the Holy in the midst of life. The hint or sign, said Augustine, was a star: "For, on this day, the Magi are said to have adored the Lord, warned by the appearance of a star and led by its guidance. In fact, they saw the star in the East on the very day He was born and they realized whose birth it portended.... To the Lord Himself, then, they came, led by the star; they adored Him who had been thus pointed out to them."<sup>4</sup>

Our experience of God is not easy to discern. God has not chosen to lay out a media campaign designed to splash a brand, logo, tag line, and jingle across our world. For most, the call of God comes by nudge and whisper, not by shove and shout.

Those who hear or see the Holy One tend to do so because they are seeking. The Magi saw the star because they scanned the night sky, questioning and discussing together what they saw. And they were ready to take the journey when they saw something of promise.

God showed up and keeps showing up in our world in Jesus. The more we probe the life and work of Jesus, ponder his words and practice his deeds, the more likely we are to experience the depth and breadth of God's character.

Second, Epiphany is a reminder that the gospel is for everyone, not just a few. For Augustine, the central truth of Epiphany was that Jesus was manifest to the Gentiles: "Therefore, the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration, for who were the Magi but the first-fruits of the Gentiles? The shepherds were Israelites; the Magi, Gentiles. The one group came from nearby; the other, from afar. Both, however, were united in [Christ] the cornerstone."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is Lord of all, not just a few. Peter Gomes likened Epiphany to a stone dropped into water that sets off a series of bigger and bigger ripples: "We begin to find ourselves with our fellow believers in all places and at all times, drawn in relationship to those circles that emanate from the Incarnation of Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Epiphany keeps before us the truth that Jesus is for Magi in the courts of the mighty as well as shepherds in the fields, East as well as West, global as well as local, universal as well as sectarian. The season of Epiphany rebukes the provincialism and spiritual myopia of too many Christians.

This was a particularly important message to Augustine, because the unity reflected in the idea that God sent Jesus for Gentiles as well as Jews was a source of controversy in his day. In his sermon Augustine counters the Donatists, who he claims do not celebrate Epiphany because they do not believe Jesus had been manifest to all the same way.

Third, Epiphany reinforces that meeting Jesus leaves us altered, different persons. Augustine concluded his Epiphany day sermon by reminding his listeners that the Magi did not return to their homes by the same road they traveled to Palestine: "For this is why the Magi did not return as they had come. The way was changed; their way of life was changed."<sup>7</sup>

Augustine understood this, of course, better than most. Born in North Africa, Augustine rejected the Christian life taught him by his pious mother, Monica. He took more than one mistress, fathered at least one child outside of marriage, and dabbled in a variety of philosophical systems. Then in 386, Augustine came under the influence of the preaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. The moment of his dramatic conversion came in a garden, and is recounted in his *Confessions*, written ten years later:

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I snatched [the Bible] up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.<sup>8</sup>

At age thirty-three his life changed course.

During Epiphany we discover that paying homage to Jesus in the manger leaves us different. We cannot return to the same place, to do the same things in the same way. Augustine learned, as did Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Peter, and Paul before him, and as you and I after him, that an encounter with God leaves us altered.

Christmas is the season when we celebrate that God took the risk to enter human history, with all its limitations, in the baby named Jesus. Epiphany is its logical successor, the season in which week-by-week we grow in our awareness that Jesus is revealed to the whole world (the story of the Magi), that Jesus is uniquely related to God (the baptism of Jesus), and that Jesus came to accomplish a remarkable work (the miracle at Cana). It is, as Augustine said long ago, a feast worthy of devout celebration.

## NOTES

1 Peter J. Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), 30.

2 Peter G. Cobb, "The History of the Christian Year," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 414-415.

3 Augustine, Sermon 202, in Mary Sarah Muldowney, trans., *Saint Augustine: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), 71.

4 Ibid.

5 Augustine, 71-72.

6 Gomes, 31.

7 Augustine, 74.

8 John K. Ryan, trans., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Image Books, 1960), 202.

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