

Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany

BY AMBER AND JOHN INSCORE ESSICK

The Epiphany feast completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Three traditions—baking a Kings' Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi's blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles—help us interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

To celebrate the feast of Epiphany is to continue down the liturgical path that originates in the anticipatory weeks of Advent. The feast completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Like the Magi who anticipated, recognized, and welcomed the infant king, congregations and families can recognize and proclaim the appearance of God's chosen one. Thus, Epiphany is the culmination of the Christmas season, not its ending.

Recovering three historical Epiphany traditions — baking a Kings' Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi's blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles — can help God's people interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

THE KINGS' CAKE

Just as the Magi made a careful search for the child king upon his birth, so we should acknowledge that an important component of our faith involves seeking and searching for the Lord in unlikely places. One delightful way to celebrate Epiphany in the home is to prepare and eat a Kings' Cake with friends and family. In this symbolic search for the baby Jesus, children and adults gather to eat a delicious cake or pastry with a toy baby hidden inside.

The person who finds the baby Jesus in his or her piece of cake is awarded the honor of providing the next year's cake and/or hosting the celebration.

At an Epiphany celebration a few years ago, we were all surprised to find at least six or seven baby Jesus figures in the cake! While the baker seemed to have misunderstood the directions, everyone found baby Jesus on that day.

Kings' Cakes are made in many shapes. One tradition involves a wreath-shaped cake, which symbolizes the circuitous route the Magi took to avoid King Herod, who hunted for the Christ child to harm him. Also, in some parts of the world there is a tradition of using a bean instead of a figurine.

Many Hispanic bakeries will carry *Rosca de Reyes* (the Kings' Cake) in the days leading up to the feast of Epiphany on January 6. In the Gulf Coast region of the United States there is a similar product, the King Cake, available for Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday, or Shrove Tuesday), the feast that concludes the extended season of Epiphany. Remember when you are shopping for King Cake that the date of Mardi Gras varies each year because it is tied to the lunar calendar, like Easter. If these cakes are not sold in your area, or you prefer to bake your own, many recipes for *Rosca de Reyes* and New Orleans-style King Cake are available on the Internet.

The Kings' Cake tradition is as meaningful as it is enjoyable. Besides the element of searching involved, any time Christians gather around the table it evokes images of the Lord's Supper at which we share in the presence of Christ. Even as the risen Christ was made known to his followers in the breaking of bread, so on Epiphany celebrants discover the incarnate Christ as they break and eat the Kings' Cake. There is also an important link between hospitality and the Epiphany: did not the Magi enjoy the hospitality of the Holy Family? Did not King Herod display a considerable *lack* of hospitality when he deceived and exploited his guests? As we give and receive hospitality during Christmas and Epiphany, we participate in the story of the Magi and their search for the Christ child, we celebrate the joy of Jesus' appearance, and we find God at a surprisingly familiar place: the table.

THE MAGI'S BLESSING

Less frequently mentioned in discussions of hospitality is its reciprocal nature. Often when guests receive a host's welcome and provision, they bless the household who welcomes them. Another tradition of Epiphany invokes the Magi's blessing upon the household that hosts the party. Guests typically read a brief, responsive liturgy that includes the biblical account of the Magi's visit and then "chalk the door" with a series of marks.

The markings include letters, numbers, and crosses in a pattern like this: 20 † C † M † B † 12. The numbers correspond to the calendar year (20 and 12, for instance, for the year 2012); the crosses stand for Christ; and the letters have a two-fold significance: C, M, and B are the initials for the traditional names of the Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), but they are also an abbreviation of the Latin blessing *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, "May Christ bless this house."

A brief liturgy fit for chalking the lintel can be found at the end of this article. Although the service of chalking the door with the Magi's blessing is intended for an Epiphany celebration in a private family dwelling, you can adapt it for other contexts. At any time during the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany it may be used to bless a room in a hospital, nursing home, or extended-care facility; to inaugurate the spring semester in a college dormitory room; to set aside a Bible study meeting place, choir practice room, or youth area at church; and so on.

The Magi, who journeyed a great distance to recognize the birth of a foreign king, recognized the blessing of peace that this king's appearance signified. Their gifts and obeisance to the new king implied their acceptance of his peaceful reign. As we reenact the Magi's blessing, we acknowledge that Christ's entrance into the world makes our homes places of peace and hospitality.

CANDLELIGHT ON EPIPHANY

From Advent wreaths to Christmas Eve candlelight services to symbolic tongues of fire on Pentecost, candlelight is an important metaphor and teaching tool for many congregations throughout the liturgical year. In addition to the Kings' Cake and Magi's blessing, thoughtful and intentional incorporation of lighted candles in homes and churches can help us reclaim Epiphany as a celebration of the arrival of the Magi. The candlelight also reminds us that the feast of Epiphany marks the theophany of Christ, the recognition of Christ in his baptism by the Father and Holy Spirit.

According to Luke and John, God's appearance in the person of Jesus is comparable to light entering a darkened world. When Simeon took the Christ child in his arms, he praised God for sending salvation and light to all nations and as a glory to God's people of Israel

(Luke 2:32). The prologue of John proclaims that the Word is God's light, already appeared in our midst, though not everyone recognizes its arrival (John 1:4-5). Many congregations gather on Epiphany for a service of candlelight and lections to celebrate the coming of God's light. It is common in these services for celebrants to process with candle in hand or along a path marked by luminaria – traditionally made by setting candles in sand inside

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small bags — to a location suitable for a series of readings, hymns, and prayers. If indoors, a candlelight procession into the sanctuary is envisioned, whereas an outdoor procession might climax around a nativity scene. When coupled with a Kings' Cake or blessing of the Magi, candlelight Epiphany services on the twelfth day of Christmas can teach valuable lessons to children and adults about adoring the Word made flesh.

In the feast of Epiphany God's people can also learn from the Magi how to be attentive to the light. The Magi observed the heavens with great acumen, but their efforts to find the newborn king ultimately required insights gained from a close reading of the Scriptures. On Epiphany, then, consider depicting the night sky and Magi's star by lighting a series of smaller candles before lighting a larger, central candle as a means of preparing to hear the Scriptures read aloud. With some planning, it can be meaningful to incorporate the Christ candle from the Advent wreath for such a purpose. In this way, the lighting of candles in worship serves as a visual representation of the Church's need for divine assistance to read faithfully about God's presence in our midst.

The act of lighting candles in the home or sanctuary focuses our liturgical attention and helps narrate the drama of God's self-revelation in Jesus.

CONCLUSION

As you prepare to celebrate Epiphany in your home or church, bear in mind a couple practical suggestions. First, *hold the tradition lightly*. Take advantage of the fact Epiphany traditions vary by region, denomination, and family. If your church does not celebrate Epiphany on January 6, celebrate it on the Sunday before or after. Any of the activities associated with Epiphany lend themselves well to a children's time in worship or in Sunday school. Even a home gathering held on January 5 or 7 is better than none at all. Flexibility, rather than rigidity, will help us to recover Epiphany celebrations over time.

Second, *involve as many people as possible when establishing your traditions*. If the guests at the party live near one another, it may be possible to chalk everyone's door as part of the celebration. Some congregations even distribute chalk in church on the Sunday prior to Epiphany. Another way to meet others and share the joy of Epiphany is to purchase a Kings' Cake from a local Hispanic bakery. Three Kings' Day, as it is also called, is widely celebrated among Hispanic, Latin, and some European cultures, so many of them will be familiar with the cake. Exposure to those in our neighborhoods from other cultures on Epiphany reinforces the concept that Christ's manifestation is a blessing to all people.

To proclaim the Epiphany is to celebrate the Epiphany. Reclaiming the feast of Epiphany means that families and congregations join the Magi in seeking and adoring the Christ child. Baking a Kings' Cake, chalking the door post with the Magi's blessing, and incorporating lighted candles in

congregational and family worship help us complete the Christmas season and be drawn deeper into the Christian liturgical pilgrimage.



Liturgy of the Magi's Blessing

Peace be with this house and all who dwell in it,
and peace to all who enter here.

In keeping the feast of Epiphany, we celebrate
the Magi's search for the infant king,
the Christ child's appearing to the world,
and the peace and hospitality shared between the Magi and the Holy
Family.

Let us hear again the Magi's story:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

(Participants now take turns using the chalk to make part of the Magi's blessing on the inside lintel of the front door.)

May this home in the coming year be a place where Christ is pleased to dwell.

May all our homes share the peace and hospitality of Christ which is revealed in the fragile flesh of an infant. Amen.



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