



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

📖 A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 75-78)

📖 Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*, pp. 69-74)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Festival of Epiphany

Augustine called Epiphany “a feast worthy of most devout celebration.” This festival 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.

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Matthew 2:1-12

### Meditation<sup>†</sup>

We, beloved, of whom the Magi were the first fruits, we are the inheritance of Christ even to the ends of the earth.... Let us so proclaim him on this earth, in this our mortal life, that we may not return the way we have come, nor retrace the footsteps of our former way of life. This is why, too, the Magi did not return the way by which they had come. A change of way meant a change of life.

*Augustine of Hippo (354-430)*

### Reflection

The feast of Epiphany on January 6 begins a season – extending in some church traditions for several weeks to the beginning of Lent – in which we celebrate God’s manifestation in Christ Jesus. When Epiphany began in the third century, it highlighted Christ’s baptism; by the next century, it also marked his manifestation to Gentiles in the persons of the Magi; later it included his self-revelation by creating new wine for the wedding at Cana.

But when Augustine described the festival as a “noteworthy celebration...throughout the world,” in his Epiphany sermon in 412, he highlighted the story of the Magi. For this reason, he noted, “the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration.” In that sermon Augustine reminds us of three crucial truths, Mike Clingenpeel notes.

- ▶ *God draws us with “hints and signs”* like the star that drew the Magi to Bethlehem. God is not easy to discern, Clingenpeel admits, but “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.”
- ▶ *The good news of Christ is for everyone*, uniting Israelites (represented by the shepherds) and Gentiles (the Magi). Extending this theme to include rich and poor, and global as well as local persons, Clingenpeel writes, “Epiphany rebukes the provincialism and spiritual myopia of too many Christians.”
- ▶ *Meeting Christ “leaves us altered, different persons.”* As the Magi “left for their own country by another road” to avoid Herod (Matthew 2:12), so our lives are deeply changed by Christ.

The Magi continue to fascinate us. Christian tradition and art have embroidered their story by adding their number (three), names (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), motives (kings coming to honor the King), and colorful mode of transportation (camels). Amber and John Inscore Essick commend three traditions to help us live into the



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Magi's story and experience the mystery of Christ with them. "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."

- ▶ *Sharing a Kings' Cake (Rosca de Reyes)* — a pastry with a toy baby hidden inside — with our family and friends draws attention to the themes of searching and hospitality in the story.
- ▶ *Marking the front door frame with the Magi's blessing* helps us "acknowledge [with them] that Christ's entrance into the world makes our homes places of peace and hospitality."
- ▶ *The use of lighted candles in homes and churches* reminds us that the Magi followed a star's light to Christ. Celebrants might process with candles, or walk on paths marked by luminaria, to a place for worship. "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.... 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."

### Study Questions

1. Why, in Christian tradition, was the story of the Magi highlighted at the Epiphany festival? What themes are most important in the story?
2. Often in crèches we see the Magi standing beside the shepherds and angels. Do you think this popular emendation to the Nativity stories draws out their meaning, or distorts it?
3. Discuss how the three traditions described by Amber and John Inscore Essick can enrich your congregation's worship during Epiphany. How might you use them in your home to celebrate Christ with friends and family? How can these traditions help you share the good news in other contexts?
4. How does Reginald Heber's "Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning" draw us into the Magi's story?

### Departing Hymn: "Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning" (vv. 1, 3, and 4)

Brightest and best of the stars of the morning,  
dawn on our darkness and lend us your aid;  
star of the east, the horizon adorning,  
guide where our infant redeemer is laid.

What shall we give him in costly devotion?  
Shall we bring incense and offerings divine,  
gems of the mountain and pearls of the ocean,  
myrrh from the forest or gold from the mine?

Vainly we offer such lavish oblation,  
vainly with gifts would his favor secure;  
richer by far is the heart's adoration,  
dearer to God are the prayers of the poor.

*Reginald Heber* (1811), adapted  
Tune: MORNING STAR

† St. Augustine, *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany*, Sermon 202 (New York: Paulist Press, 1952), 173.

# The Festival of Epiphany

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider the key role that the biblical story of the Magi plays in the festival of Epiphany.
2. To discuss how three historical Epiphany traditions help us interpret the festival and celebrate it appropriately.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Brightest and Best of the Stars of the Morning” locate tune MORNING STAR in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

A few years ago I received a phone call out of the blue from a woman who had read me quoted in a local newspaper article about Christmas. Would I come to Stillwell Retirement Center and lead a weekday devotion- al that she prepares for fellow retirees, she wondered. Since the festival of Epiphany was coming up, I volunteered to do a chalking of the lintel service to share the Magi’s blessing with her friends. I adapted a brief liturgy that I had learned from church friends the year before.

About fifteen residents showed up – most of them struggling with walkers or wheel chairs (it was a large turnout, she assured me) – to pray, sing, and create small signs of blessing for one another on colored paper with magic markers. After the worship service, several folks invited me to eat lunch with them in the dining hall. But first, my host wanted me to do one more thing for her. Leading me down the hall to her small apartment, she said: “This is where I live now.” Rolling a bit of scotch tape into a ring on the back of the blessing “20 † C † M † B † 09,” she asked be to attach it to the door lintel that was too high for her to reach. “Now it feels more like home,” she said. “Thank you.”

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for the revelation of his love to us, as it once was revealed to the Magi, in the birth of Jesus Christ.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 2:1-12 from a modern translation.

## Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

## Reflection

This study and the next one, “When Grace Appears,” reflect on Epiphany – the feast on January 6 and the season that follows – as an appropriate culmination of the Christmas season. For many Christians today, Epiphany is the least understood and celebrated part of the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany festival season. You

might use Mike Clingenpeel's reflection on Augustine's sermon to begin developing the theological significance of Epiphany and our formation as disciples during this time. (More will be said about these in the next study.) Let Amber and John Inscore Essick guide you to activities for your study group (or member's families) to enjoy these deep truths of Epiphany and share them with others.

### *Study Questions*

1. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Christ to "all the nations," including the Gentiles. By the fourth century, the festival became focused on the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, for according to Scripture they were the first Gentiles to know and worship Jesus. Because Matthew's story of the Magi is entirely separate from the Lucan story of Jesus' birth, it was easy to focus on Luke's story of the shepherds and angels at Christmas and save the story of the Magi's visit for the Epiphany celebration a few days later.  
Following Augustine's sermon, Mike Clingenpeel highlights three themes in the Magi's story: God draws us into relationship with subtle "hints and signs" that require our faithful attention; God draws all people (Israelites and Gentiles) through the Christ; and the experience of Christ deeply changes what we value and how we see the world. Amber and John Inscore Essick address the same themes in different ways: correlative to the divine hints and signs is the Magi's spiritual searching, which is embraced and deepened by their guided study of Scripture; God's welcoming of the Gentiles is embodied in the hospitality of the Holy Family, and stands in stark contrast to the false flattery shown by King Herod; the change the Christ brings is like being led out of our darkness into the light of God's love.
2. Crèches quickly get crowded with various figures combined from the stories in Luke and Matthew and elaborated with appropriate animals: sheep for the shepherds, camels for the Magi, and an ox and donkey (symbolizing Gentiles and Israelites respectively). Is this visual conflation of the biblical stories merely confusing to young Christians and a source of scandal to historically minded modern people? Or is it an attempt to depict the theological riches of the nativity? (To clarify things a bit, some Christians start with the Holy Family at the crèche, but add the shepherds on Christmas Day and the Magi on Epiphany.) In some contemporary crèches, Santa Claus and his reindeer show up as well. Does this demean the biblical witness, or creatively extend it into the secular realm?
3. Congregations might incorporate the King's Cake, the Magi's blessing, and lighted processions into public worship, or use them in more intimate settings of spiritual formation groups, choir meetings, fellowship meals, and so on. Families can use these powerful celebrations alone, share them with Christian friends, or share them as a witness to unchurched friends in the neighborhood. Amber and John Inscore Essick suggest using the Magi's blessing at any time during Christmas or Epiphany "to bless a room in a hospital, nursing home, or extended-care facility; to inaugurate the spring semester in a college dormitory room;... and so on. Recalling the Inscore Essick's recommendations to "hold the tradition lightly" and "involve as many people as possible when establishing your traditions," encourage members to brainstorm on how they might adapt all three traditions in these and similar contexts.
4. Reginald Heber uses "we" throughout to help us identify with the Magi, to see the story from their perspective. He does not focus on details of the story, but on the meaning of those details. For example, in the first verse the "star of the east, the horizon adorning" points ahead to God's love in Christ Jesus that will "dawn on our darkness." In verse three, the Magi's gifts represent all elements of the creation returned now to the creator in "costly devotion." However, the essence of the Magi's gifts, and ours, is described in the final verse: they represent humility, or what Jesus calls for his disciples to be in the Sermon on the Mount—"poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

### *Departing Hymn*

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.