

Feast of the Epiphany of Our Lord  
January 6, 2009


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✧ Jesu juva ✧

## KNOWING CHRIST BY FAITH

Matthew 2:1-12

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

he utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened; the utterance of him who hears the words of God, and has the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open: 'I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly. Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city.'" Thus the prophet Balaam spoke concerning the coming Messiah in the days of the Exodus as the children of Israel were nearing the end of their time of wandering in the wilderness.

Balaam was not a Hebrew. He had not come out of Egypt, but was a native of the land. And he was not a model prophet by any means. Balaam was more magician and soothsayer than prophet. Moreover, he hired out his services to those who would pay. He had been hired by Balak the king of Moab to bring a curse from God down on the people of Israel. But God would not curse His chosen people and instead used Balaam to pronounce blessings upon them. Yes, a Gentile prophet is used to speak blessing to Israel and to proclaim the Savior, the Star that comes from Jacob.

And now Gentiles come to Jerusalem seeking this Savior, saying to King Herod: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." These men from the East had heard the Word of the Lord through Balaam's prophecy from long ago and had watched for its fulfillment. And having seen the heavenly sign at last, they have made their way to Jerusalem, to the Palace, to find the One who is to be the Divine King, who is to subdue all of the enemies of the faithful and rule over all the earth.

But in Jerusalem they find not the new born king, but an old and crafty tyrant. And Herod inquires of his priests and scribes as to the birthplace of the Christ according to the Scriptures; and they point him to Bethlehem. So, not having found the newborn King in the expected place, the magi go to a most unexpected place, to the little town of Bethlehem, a po-dunk town known as Ephratha, a mere stopping point on the road to Ephrath.

Nevertheless, they make their way to Bethlehem, and seeing the Star again brightly shining over that little town, they rejoice. They find the house where the Holy Family is now dwelling and entering in, what did they expect to see? A young king with his retinue of nursemaids and servants? A child decked out in regal splendor? But what do they find? A peasant child with his mother who is but a young virgin, the wife of a carpenter. It must not have been what they expected to find. But look at how great is their faith! They do not question, but immediately fall down and worship him.

St. Peter Chrysologus, a 5th century bishop of Ravenna, says: "Today the Magi find the one they have followed as He shown in the sky. Today the Magi see clearly the one they have long awaited as He lay hidden among the stars. Today the Magi gaze in deep wonder at what they see: heaven on earth, earth in heaven, humankind in God, God in human flesh, one whom the whole universe cannot contain now enclosed in a tiny body. As they look, they believed and did not question, as their symbolic gifts bear witness: incense for God, gold for a King, myrrh for One who is to die. So the Gentiles, who were last, become the first: the faith of the Magi is the first fruits of the belief of the Gentiles" (from Sermon 160, quoted in Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church by J. Robert Wright).



The prophecy from a Gentile has brought faith to these Gentiles. They heard the Word of the Lord and believed. And now they have seen Him who is called the Star of Jacob, the Scepter of Israel. And this one will grow to fulfill Balaam's prophecy, to defeat all of the enemies of God, to destroy sin, to conquer death, and to condemn and punish the devil. And He does so not through might of arms, but through the sacrifice of love. Yes, He who is true God and true Man in one Person gives up His own life in order to undo the power of His enemies, and proclaims His victory when He rises in the flesh, now glorified, from His tomb. And now through His Church His victory is proclaimed and His rule extended throughout the world.

Yes these Gentiles were the first-fruits of that great ingathering of peoples. And we are among the latter fruits, who share their faith. And now the Star of Jacob, the Scepter of Israel comes to us with His Holy Word and with His abiding presence through the Sacrament of the Altar. Let us not be like Herod and the Jews who refused to believe and fought violently against Christ and His Gospel, but rather let us be as these Magi who came from afar and found the Infant King and worshipped Him.

Yes let us believe as they did; for if we do not we will be without excuse. They had the prophecy of Balaam and believed it. We have the entire Old and New Testaments to point us to Christ and reveal Him to us. Yes, let us also seek out Christ our Lord in the places He has promised to be. For now we will find Him neither in Jerusalem nor in Bethlehem, but here in the Word that is preached; and there upon the altar under bread and wine. It is not what our minds might have expected; but these are the places He has promised to come to us with blessing. So like these Magi let us come and worship Him, receiving His gifts of grace and life to us, and responding with gifts, not only our offerings, but our own confession His holy Name, and with praise for His marvelous grace. For now the Star, who is Christ Jesus, God in the flesh, is revealed to us. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧