

by **Therese Sherlock, CSJ**

*One of the traditions of Epiphany is the blessing of homes. Gather your group to bless your reflection space with the following prayer.*

**LEADER:** Loving God, bless this house (or this room) and all who dwell here.

**ALL:** *(Extend one arm in blessing)*

**Make your home with us.**

*(Repeat after each prayer).*

- 1:** May we make this a place of openness and daring.
- 2:** May we make this a place of acceptance and support.
- 3:** May we make this a place of laughter and joy.
- 4:** May we make this a place of love and forgiveness.
- 5:** May we make this a place where we speak your name and rejoice in your presence.

**LEADER:** Loving God, lead us on our journey in faith together.

**ALL:** *May our longing to be one with you grow as we seek you in your Word. Amen.*

An icon invites people to spend time with it, to move from seeing the icon with one's eyes, to seeing it with the heart. An icon expresses the mystery of our human encounters with God and has the purpose of drawing us into the mystery.

An icon is a holy message written with shape, form, and color rather than words. The Church of the

**Sunday Readings:**  
 Isaiah 60.1-6  
 Ephesians 3.2-3, 5-6  
 Matthew 2.1-12

# SUNDAY

by **SUNDAY**

Epiphany in Coon Rapids, Minnesota, commissioned Clairvaux McFarland, OSF, to write the icon below, picturing the coming of the magi for which the church is named.

● **As you look at the icon, what do you see with your eyes?**

The icon shows Mary and her child in a cave, which symbolizes both the womb, the tomb, and the black chaos from which all life springs. The edges of the cave are green,

life springing up around it. Green bushes grow.

Mary is wearing red, the color of earth. Jesus has an old face but a baby's body. The magi are leaning into the cave, just getting a foot in. The mountains lean with them. The star outside the cave and the frame of the icon points to the child. Something important is happening.

● **What more do you see in the icon with your eyes?**

● **What do you see with your heart?**



Image courtesy of Church of the Epiphany, Coon Rapids, MN

# GOSPEL

## Where is the newborn king?



**NARRATOR:** After Jesus' birth in Bethlehem of Judah during the reign of King Herod, magi from the east arrived one day in Jerusalem.

**MAGI:** Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.

**NARRATOR:** At this news King Herod became greatly disturbed, and with him all Jerusalem. He summoned all of the chief priests and scribes of the people.

**HEROD:** Where is the Messiah to be born?

**PRIESTS, SCRIBES:** In Bethlehem of Judah. Here is what the prophet has written.

**MICAH:** And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the princes of Judah, since from you shall come a ruler who is shepherd to my people Israel.

**NARRATOR:** Herod called the magi aside and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent

them to Bethlehem with these instructions.

**HEROD:** Go and get detailed information about the child. Report your findings to me, so that I may go and offer him homage, too.

**NARRATOR:** After their audience with the king, the magi set out. The star which they had observed at its rising went ahead of them until it came to a standstill over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house, found the child with Mary, his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They received a message in a dream not to return to Herod, so they went back to their own country by another route.

Matthew 2.1-12

## Jesus is light to all peoples.

**M**atthew's stories about Jesus' birth don't mention the manger, the swaddling clothes, the shepherds, or angels singing in the sky. Matthew calls us to faith by another route. He talks about learned foreigners journeying from far away to find the newborn king of the Jews. These journeyers are people for whom God's ancient promise to Abraham will come true, "In you shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."

Matthew's learned Gentiles discover through their study of the heavens a new star that sets them on an earthly journey. A phenomenon in nature stirs their curiosity. The star leads them to Jerusalem, where they consult Israel's priests and scribes about where their king is to be born. Israel's scholars know the answer. The prophet Micah says Bethlehem. Gentile knowledge and Israelite revelation agree; both point to Bethlehem and Jesus.

Having confirmed that the heavenly star leads them on the right earthly road, the wise pilgrims from afar journey on to Bethlehem. There they find Jesus and give him their gifts and their



Mosaics line the nave in Sant' Apollinare Nuovo, a church in Ravenna, Italy. The three magi, the first

love. Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of Jesus to Gentile seekers.

● **What stirs your curiosity to search for new meaning?**

● **What questions do you live with?**

**T**he magi do not end their journey at Israel's temple or Herod's royal court but in a family circle. They find the child with his mother. They pay him a king's homage and offer him royal gifts in the house where his family is living. Their journey begins in study and the stars and ends in reverence where a mother is nurturing her child.

Many Epiphany customs celebrate the family circle as a holy place where seekers continue to find God's love manifest. Spanish-speaking children receive their presents on Three Kings' Day. French-speaking people bake a Cake of the Kings. The person who finds the slice with a pea or bean baked into it becomes king for the day. Italians drum in Twelfth Night with bagpipes and noisemakers. The tradition of blessing homes on Epiphany recognizes the family as the domestic Church, the Christian community in small, the bonds in which most Christians first find faith in Jesus.

● **What Epiphany customs do you keep in your family?**

**“I**t was a cold coming we had of it,” T.S. Eliot has one of the seekers report in his poem “The Coming of the Magi.”  
*Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long  
journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.\**

Eliot brings to mind another aspect of the magi's journey—they step out of the familiar and comfortable to search for something more. We have all done this—left a job with security and benefits to start a small business; studied literature or theology in college when the conventional wisdom said to get a business degree; joined a faith-sharing group where there are no familiar faces.

A great thing about being human is that we can always change. Conversion, turning away and turning toward, is a capacity we have. We can become more and respond to mystery. We simply have to look up, see the star that is calling us, find some traveling companions, and set out. The divine awaits on a new horizon.

● **What new horizon summons you?**

**I**n Sunday's second reading Paul describes the same mystery Matthew's story communicates: “In Christ Jesus the Gentiles are co-heirs with the Jews, members of the same body and sharers of the promise through the preaching of the gospel” (Ephesians 3.5-6).

Matthew writes in the A.D. 80s for Christian communities swelling with new Gentile believers like those Paul addresses. Like the magi, many Gentiles find in Jesus the end of their quest for the purpose and destiny of humankind.

Traditionally in nativity pageants, children who play the magi dress in the clothes of people from distant lands to show that all peoples claim Jesus as their light and life.

Among Earth's 7.8 billion people some 1.2 billion are Catholic Christians. Another billion are Protestant and Orthodox Christians. Christmas cribs reflect the many cultures in which Christianity has taken root.

● **What do you know about how the Gentile people from whom you descend came to faith in Jesus?**

*\*Collected Poems 1909-1935, Harcourt Brace, 1934, p. 125*



Gentile believers, lead a procession of saints and martyrs to worship the Christ child on Mary's lap.

- In what ways does the global Church touch you?
- How does your local church connect with the global church?



## All nations will come.

Both Sunday's first reading from Isaiah and Psalm 72, the congregation's response to the reading, describe visitors from Africa who journey north seeking God's light in Israel. The scriptures of the Epiphany Liturgy of the Word combine to describe journeys that traverse the earth—the magi from east to west, the caravans of Sheba from south to north.

Third Isaiah, a prophet during Israel's rebuilding after the exile, envisions God restoring Israel to the splendor it had in Solomon's reign, when the Queen of Sheba came to visit. Psalm 72 describes the messianic era as a time when justice will flower and kings of Tarshish, the Isles, Arabia, and Sheba—the ends of the earth—will bring gifts and tribute.

The Queen of Sheba, Makeda, whose mother educated her to become head

of state, ruled from 1005-955 B.C. in upper Egypt, Ethiopia, and parts of Arabia. She is legendary for her wealth and trading caravans. She had 520 camels and 370 ships. In 985 B.C., she received an expedition from China. Her journey north to visit Solomon not only honored his kingdom but gave Israel importance among nations.

Like the magi, the Queen of Sheba and the other kings mentioned in Psalm 72 come from afar. Their journeys testify to the glory of Israel's God. Matthew sees the queen's visit as a foreshadowing of the faith of Gentiles "in one greater than Solomon" (12.42).

### God's glory shines in Israel.

**Rise up in splendor, Jerusalem!  
Your light has come,  
the glory of the Holy One  
shines upon you.  
See, darkness covers the earth;  
thick clouds cover the peoples;  
but upon you the Holy One shines,  
and over you appears God's glory.**

**Nations shall walk by your light,  
rulers by your shining radiance.  
Lift up your eyes and look around;  
they all gather together,  
they come to you; your sons  
shall come from far away,**

**your daughters shall be  
carried  
on their nurses' arms.**

**Then you shall see and be  
radiant; your heart will thrill  
and overflow  
for the abundance of the sea  
shall be brought to you,  
and the wealth of the nations  
will come to you.  
Caravans of camels  
shall fill you, dromedaries  
from Midian and Ephah;  
all from Sheba shall come  
bearing gold and frankincense,  
and proclaiming the praises  
of the Holy One.**

Isaiah 60.1-6

- What spiritual riches have you received from the peoples of one of the four directions?

## PRAY

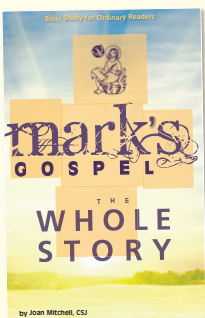
Name a light that has shone in your life this holy season. Express prayers of thanksgiving and petition together. After each prayer, say:

**ALL: Jesus, we walk in your light.**

**SONG: "O Come, All Ye Faithful."**



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88 pages, \$10.00

The Gospels we hear on Sundays this year will come primarily from the Gospel according to Mark. Sister Joan's book is for individuals and groups who want to discover how Mark weaves the stories of Jesus' earliest followers into a narrative of faith. The chapters are short, with plenty of reflection questions to choose from. Studying Mark is an ideal way to begin 2021.

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