



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, *Chief of Parish Ministries*

## Epiphany: iMAGIne

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, January 4, 2015  
The Second Sunday of Christmas—Based on Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12*

Today we're celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany, technically a couple of days early. Epiphany, small e, is an experience of sudden and striking realization. Epiphany, capital E, in our tradition is January 6, to commemorate the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, the coming of the Magi.

At St. Bart's, at our Eucharist service on January 6, we'll observe Epiphany on the actual day. But we wanted to celebrate in a big way today, when we're all here together. We'll get to sing "We Three Kings" and have a special procession.

Last week, I presided at a Eucharist service at the Community of the Holy Spirit, an Episcopal convent at West 150th Street (these are the coolest nuns ever). The CHS sisters have a wonderful Nativity scene in their Chapel. Large figures of Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus in the manger, and a remarkable variety of animals rest on straw on the floor. All these figures are arranged under the altar, so that the altar becomes the walls and roof of the stable.

Across the chapel, there are also large figures of the three kings, carrying gifts. They started at the door and are making their way around the chapel. Each day they move a bit closer to the baby Jesus. They'll reach the baby in the manger on January 6.

Maybe you have your own crèche or Nativity scene, and do the same thing. St. Bart's has an exquisite crèche in the corner of our nave. We had a Nativity set in my house when I was growing up. Every year, out it came. Every year, my brother and I moved the figures around in various creative ways. I distinctly remember the camels ...

This story from Matthew's Gospel is a wonderful story, a familiar story—maybe too familiar. The wise men from the East (read: exotic) have seen this great star and come to Jerusalem. They start asking around town where to find the child who has been born king of the Jews? They get instructions to Bethlehem. They follow the star there to find the child with Mary his mother. They kneel before him. They open their treasure chests and present gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Those gifts say something about who this child is and will be. Gold: a gift fit for a king. Frankincense: a gift fit for a priest. (If you were here at our late Christmas Eve service, you smelled frankincense.) Myrrh is an embalming spice; it foreshadows what is to come for this child.

Of course, there's another strand of this story: the story of King Herod. Herod the Great. History shows that, while Herod did have some good points, he was well known to be paranoid and murderous. He killed his wife, his mother, and several of his sons, and a lot of innocent people. Herod's reaction to the news of a child king's being born sounds very much in character.

The remarkable star, the exotic visitors from the East, the dark threat of Herod—all three strands are braided together into this story.

The great Biblical scholar Raymond Brown notes that the church has worked overtime in imagining the wise-men strand. These "wise men" are Magi; from the same word we get "magician." They were astrologers, even sorcerers, fortune-tellers. They were Gentiles. It would be hard to get more Gentile.

There is nothing in the text that says there were any particular number of Magi, and nothing that says they were all male. In fact, some scholars have suggested that the text clearly shows some of these Magi were women: they asked for directions.

But in the Christian imagination, these Magi have become kings, and there are exactly three of them. We've given them different colors, ethnicities, even different names. There is even a story in an ancient saints calendar noting these three

wise men spent the rest of their lives spreading the gospel. When they are about 100 years old, they meet for one last Christmas reunion in Armenia. There they celebrate the Mass of the Nativity together and then die within days of each other.

But Brown doesn't criticize the church for doing this imagining. Instead, he says that's exactly what Matthew hoped would happen! Matthew, perhaps more than any other gospel writer, takes pains to show that God fulfills God's promises.

There's the promise in Isaiah: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Nations (meaning Gentiles) shall stream to your light; and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

What an incredible promise God makes through Isaiah! This shows hopefulness almost beyond imagining, especially to the people of Israel who had spent years in the darkness of exile in Babylon. Even though some had been allowed to return to Jerusalem and were trying to rebuild the temple, they were experiencing struggle and opposition. They lacked resources, and the people there didn't exactly support what they were doing.

But here is this vision of peace and prosperity held out to them: ships bearing treasures from lands far away are arriving, the wealth of nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you.

A multitude of camels shall cover you? I have to tell you, I've been waiting my entire ordained life to get to preach on this verse! To me, it's one of the funniest verses in the Bible, and I crack up every time I read it. It sounds comical, and not very pleasant. Our Bible Study group had some fun with that image this week. After some very creative interpretations, we finally realized the camels were the moving vans of the ancient world, carrying treasures and wealth and nations into Israel. The "you" refers to Israel, not a person.

Anyone who lives in Manhattan gets this. Nations stream to us. Ships come to us bearing treasure from lands far away. The wealth of the nations comes to us. A multitude of vehicles covers us.

God is honoring God's promises, but in ways that are not expected.

Matthew is the gospel writer who introduces his gospel by recounting 42 generations of a genealogy from Abraham to Jesus. A pretty standard genealogy, except that there are five women's names in it—and these are wild-card, irregular women. Come to think of it, a number of the men in that genealogy are wild-card, irregular men, too. God is working through unusual people, people you don't expect.

God ushers in a new age with the birth of this child. It's a story full of wild-card irregulars. Among the first people to recognize the child are these Magi, Gentiles, strange exotic foreigners. God's new creation is expanding through unlikely people. God's new creation is also met with what one commentator calls "The Empire Strikes Back" response: "The empire strikes back as Herod uses all the resources at his disposal—religious, military, social—to subvert God's work. While the religious elite stand by, inactive."

We see the dynamic between the powerful settled center (Herod, the religious elite) and the apparently powerless, insignificant, mobile people on the margins (Magi, Joseph and Mary). We see that dynamic today, yes? The empire still strikes back. God continues to work through the people on the margins, who continue to bring God's justice and love and mercy to us.

God ushers in a new age with the birth of this child. It's a story full of wild-card irregulars. This story of the Magi is not just a sweet tale that gets acted out in our Christmas pageants and on Epiphany. It is one of the most powerful stories in the gospel. One writer describes it as "the entire gospel crammed into a few paragraphs." [Warren Carter: *Matthew and the Margins*]

So I'm glad we're celebrating Epiphany by singing "We Three Kings of Orient Are" and by processing with kids wearing crowns and bearing gifts, by moving the Magi of our nativity sets. That's good theology.

We can imagine ourselves as part of the great story of Jesus, the great story of God's love. We, too, each in our own way, are wild-card irregulars. The great story of God's love is still going on. And we are part of that story.

Amen.

*For the references to Raymond Brown and the insights into imagination, I am indebted to Professor Thomas G. Long of Emory University's Candler School of Theology (Christian Century 12/24/2014).*

**©2015 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.**

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org)  
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022