

# Sermon Text for January 6, 2019

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Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

## ***“Covenant Renewal Service”***

It is not often that Epiphany Sunday falls on the actual day of Epiphany, January 6. This year is one of those days. The term Epiphany means literally reveal, and it is in this story where we believe that Jesus was revealed to the world as the Messiah. The shepherds first visited Jesus and that was the first reveal, but the shepherds would have been Jewish so that was the introduction of Jesus to the people of Israel, since the kings were foreigners from a foreign land this was the Epiphany, the reveal of Jesus to the world.

This story is probably better understood by poets and artists than by scholars and pastors as our microscopic analysis could easily miss the point and the essence of this story. Our goal today is to find a deeper understanding of the story without losing our wonderment and amazement of the story as a whole. We will see that the kings actually play a role in fulfilling God’s covenant with us and give us an insight into who Jesus is and how we, as we travel on our own separate journeys, can adore the newborn king.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

Let’s go back to our first reading for this morning. It is from this Scripture and from Psalm 72:10 that we get the popular cultural image of today of the three kings. Isaiah tells us in vs. 3 that nations that come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Psalm 72:10 tells us “May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts and may all the kings fall down before him.” All of these things happen in our Scripture in Matthew that we read. Isaiah goes further and he states in our reading for this morning in vs. 6 “A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.”

We find that these kings that we read about in Matthew are fulfilling a prophecy which had been depicted centuries before without even realizing it. It was a prophecy which foretold of the coming of the Messiah, the one who would bring a new covenant where our relationship with God would be a personal one where it would be lived out in community, here in what he calls his bride. But the kings didn’t know anything about this.

Matthew actually doesn’t even depict them as kings. He calls them magoi which can mean a whole series of things, one of which is not kings. Some say magicians, some say astrologers, I say the religious leaders of their region. They were the ones who led the people to

worship their own gods, their own gentile pagan gods. We know that they were constantly looking for signs from their gods for things that were to come. A common belief in that time was that stars in the sky which were atypical, what we would call comets, marked the birth of a ruler. So they were constantly on the lookout for signs from the skies that would let them know that a ruler has been born.

These religious leaders see their star in the sky and recognize that it is in the direction and over the land of the Jews and so assume that a new king of the Jews has been born. They head in that direction and stop and ask for directions from the current King of the Jews, Herod. Herod was placed in power by the Roman government to oversee the Jewish land that was occupied, owned, governed and ruled by Rome. They placed Herod who had Jewish blood thinking that he would be able to govern effectively. Herod was one of the most ruthless rulers in history, especially to those Jews who might question his power or was seen as threat to his power. Josephus wrote about him, a first century historian, in very unflattering terms. He was a tyrant, didn't listen to any of his advisers and made decisions on a whim just because he knew he had the power to make those decisions.

The Scripture tells us that Herod and all of Jerusalem were afraid by the presence of these religious leaders from another country. Here was this caravan of illegals who were trying to get into their country and find opportunity by pursuing a dream, a star and the fear of Jerusalem was they were here to take our jobs, slaughter our husbands, take our children, and savage our wives. But it turns out that Herod, the current ruler of the land, was a lot more dangerous than these foreigners who just wanted to worship the king. Maybe Jerusalem was also afraid because these foreigners knew about a new king of the Jews, and they being the chosen people of God knew nothing about it.

They are given directions, these foreign religious leaders who worshipped other gods, and then they find what they came for. Verse 10 gives us a transition that is stunning. Verse 10 takes us on a transition from a group of gentiles who were unknowing to believers. This is the key verse because for me it signifies the transition from a seeker to a believer. A person on a journey not knowing to a person on a journey filled with joy knowing Jesus. A person who knows that they are a child of the covenant. We know this happens because in the next verse, verse 11, we see them prostrate themselves before Jesus in complete humility and total worship.

Brothers and sisters, we are also children of the covenant on a journey together. We don't always know our role in that covenant, but if we continue to press on with the star of Jesus in front of us we are promised that we will find him and that he will receive us.

We find ourselves once again on the first Sunday of a new year when we find ourselves face to face with the covenant renewal service. We gather ourselves like people have gathered for centuries now to renew their vows and to reaffirm a covenant that we have with our Savior Jesus Christ. If this is your first Sunday here and you do not know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, it may seem a bit out of place for you. Nobody is forced to make a vow with Jesus, although against our will and without any help from us he died on the cross and was raised again so that we could have salvation. We did not choose Jesus, he chose us. But today we gather to recognize that this past year we have not always chosen him, but He has remained faithful.

In 1775 John Wesley used this format for one of his services and credit goes to him for the content of this service. He in turn got the idea from a Puritan Richard Alleine 100 years earlier. Each year this service would be done during a New Year's Eve watchnight service. Wesley, who began the Methodist movement, found this service rich and meaningful as he expressed in his journal "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted.", and "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing". Again in his diary he remarks "It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences. I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backsliding." As you can see this can be a powerful service if you let it be.

If you would take out the booklet which is in your bulletin. Notice that the heart of this service is found in the Covenant Prayer. This prayer requires persons to commit themselves to God. This covenant is serious and we must take it seriously. At the beginning of the prayer I will pause for a few moments to allow people to kneel if they so desire, or to bow your head in respect to the Almighty God and to the step which we are about to take together in this prayer. We will be held responsible for that in which we take part, good or bad. Approach this service with reverence, seriousness, and an open heart to God.

On the last page of the service you will find a space where you can put your signature and the date. I want to encourage all of you to read through, pray through this service. If you feel that you are able to recommit or commit yourselves for the first time to the promises which are written in these pages then sign it, mark the date, and please call me or let me know that you have done that so that I can pray for you and so that we can talk about what is involved in this recommitment, or this commitment.

It is now the year 2018, we will be taking together the first Lord's Supper together of the New Year. But even more importantly today in this service you will be given an opportunity to

embrace the new life that Jesus has chosen for you. How fitting it is that we will be able to recommit our lives to Christ and then together take part in the sign of that new commitment in the Covenant of the Lord's Supper. We will also have represented an opportunity for you to remember your baptismal covenant by taking a blue bead from the font and take it home as a reminder of the covenant that you made today.

Let us now renew our promises before Almighty God.