

THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

January 2, 2022

Isaiah 60:1–6 • Ephesians 3:2–3a, 5–6 • Matthew 2:1–12

I.

You know the famous Christmas carol,
“The Twelve Days of Christmas.”

Those twelve days refer to the period between Christmas Day (December 25),
and today, the feast of the Epiphany.

Traditionally, Epiphany was celebrated on January 6—
the twelfth day of Christmas:
“Twelve drummers drumming.”

For me, the first day of Christmas got off to an interesting start.

After celebrating the Midnight Mass, which was beautiful,
I woke up bleary-eyed,
but determined to watch the launch of the James Webb Space Telescope.

The Webb Telescope is the successor to the famous Hubble Telescope,
whose launch I remember in 8th grade—
we learned about it in Mr. Prust’s earth science class.

The Webb Telescope will allow scientists to see more of the universe
than ever before.

To do so,
it will travel a long distance—
some million miles away—
and will take up an orbit around the sun.

For me,
the lasting image will be not so much the rocket launch,
but rather the moment when the folded-up instrument left earth’s orbit.

There, in the cold, black void of space,
the sun's rays reflected off the telescope,
which began its arduous journey of discovery.

More poetically than scientifically,
it seemed to me that the telescope was itself becoming a kind of "star."

II.

The purpose of the Webb Telescope is to see distant galaxies,
and in that way to look back in time,
to the beginnings of the universe.

This is a point that has always interested me:

We actually don't see anything in real time,
because seeing requires light,
and light is constantly moving.

We can only ever look back in time,
to the moment when light left a given object
and began moving toward our eyes.

That interval is very small,
so we don't notice it.

But with the new space telescope,
humanity can back to the origins of the universe.

As scientists understand,
human beings are fundamentally explorers.

We seek to understand the universe,
and our place in it.

Science—understanding **how** things work—
inevitably points to religion and philosophy—
understanding **why** things are.

The origin of the universe,
is where those endeavors converge.

III.

Today's Gospel, of course, features a star.

The purpose of this astronomical phenomenon is to guide—
to indicate who the Son of God is.

The magi say:

“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?
We saw his star at its rising
and have come to do him homage.”

This star will guide these men to the Christ Child:

“After their audience with the king they set out.
And behold,
the star they had seen at its rising preceded them,
and stopped over the place where the child was.”

The magi, guided by the star,
reveal Christ as the Savior of all peoples—
Gentiles as well as Jews.

This is the meaning of the term “epiphany,”
which designates today's feast:

Christ is “revealed” as the Savior of all.

That point has important implications for our lives.

Christ is not just Lord for you and me;
he is the Lord of all people, and of history, and of the entire universe.

This conviction runs counter to the increasingly powerful current of relativism,
which holds that truth depends on the beliefs of each person.

It's summarized in particular phrases slogans that are becoming more common:

“My truth”—but there is no such things as different truths.

“Do you”—but personal sincerity does not make something true;
it already is or isn’t true.

The story of the magi doesn’t end with their finding Christ.

Upon encountering him,
they do something extraordinary:

“They prostrated themselves and did him homage,
Then they opened their treasures
and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”

This gesture is also part of the epiphany;
it’s the revelation that Christ is supreme.

He is meaning and purpose of our lives.

What a juxtaposition:

A star—a symbol of the vastness of the cosmos—
lights the way to a child in Bethlehem.

An encouragement for us on this feast of the Epiphany:

We, too, can render homage to Christ so that an epiphany takes place,
so that others come to behold him as Savior.

On this second day of the new year—
and, symbolically, this “twelfth day” of Christmas—
here are some possible new year’s resolutions for 2022:

1. Invite someone you know who has drifted away from Mass to return.
2. Come to Mass a few minutes early, in order to pray and be recollected.
3. Pray each day for five minutes.
4. Take up the practice, which is obligatory,
of observing each Friday as a day of penance,
even outside of Lent.

The recommended penance is to abstain from eating meat, although this may be substituted for another penance.

5. Confess our sins in the Sacrament of Penance each month.
6. Participate in the parish's monthly service project.

IV.

A final note on that new telescope.

It will never be seen again—
it's too far away.

It will eventually decompose,
once its mission is completed.

Similarly, there's a sense in the Gospel—
although it's never stated explicitly—
that the star over the Christ Child disappears.

Once the star has guided the magi to Christ,
it is never mentioned again.

It's as if the Evangelist is telling us:
"The child is what's important—not the star."

The star is eclipsed by Christ.

It has fulfilled its mission.

It has rendered homage to Christ.