

WHAT IS THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD?

The Epiphany of our Lord is the wonderful liturgical festival observed on January 6. It is the oldest of the Christmas festivals and originally the most important. Since January 6 is most often a weekday, Lutherans and liturgical Protestants sometimes shift the celebration of Epiphany to the Sunday immediately following the 6th. Epiphany is also a season that lasts until the beginning of Lent and encompasses four to nine Sundays, depending on the date of Easter.

WHAT DOES THE WORD "EPIPHANY" MEAN?

The word epiphany comes from the Greek noun *epiphaneia*, which means "shining forth," "manifestation," or "revelation." In the ancient Greco-Roman world, an epiphany referred to the appearance of one of the gods to mortals. Since Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors were considered by many to be gods, the word epiphany was also used as a term for divine majesty. The Epiphany of our Lord is the Christian festival that celebrates the many ways through signs, miracles, and preaching that Jesus revealed Himself to the world as Christ, God Incarnate, and King of kings.

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH COMMEMORATE DURING EPIPHANY?

The Festival of the Epiphany of our Lord originally commemorated three incidents that manifested the mission and divinity of Christ: the visit of the Magi ([Matthew 2:1-12](#)), the baptism of Jesus ([Mark 1:9-11](#)), and the miracle at Cana ([John 2:1-11](#)). Nowadays, most liturgical churches emphasize the visit of the Magi on January 6th and celebrate Christ's baptism on the first Sunday after the 6th.

WHO WERE THE MAGI?

The Magi were members of the religious hierarchy of ancient Persia and Media (the region corresponding to modern Iran). They were scholars and practitioners of astrology, divination, and the interpretation of dreams. Their expertise in these arcane subjects is the reason they were often referred to as "wise men." The Magi of Babylonia undoubtedly came into contact with exiled Jewish priests living among them. Through these acquaintances the Magi learned of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming of Christ, including the cryptic "messianic star" passage of [Numbers 24:17](#). This explains why the astral phenomenon described in [Matthew 2:1-12](#) so fascinated the wise men of the gospel narrative.

Many pious legends about the wise men have arisen over the centuries. In the western Christian churches, these include the traditions that there were three Magi who visited Jesus, that their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and that they were kings. To get more detailed information about the Magi, we invite you to read two excellent resources on the subject: [The Magi/Wise Man FAQ](#) by Rev. Dr. Richard P. Bucher and [The Visit of the Magi -- Fact or Fiction?](#) by Rev. Dr. Paul L. Maier.

WHAT IS THE LITURGICAL COLOR FOR EPIPHANY?

White, the color of purity, holiness, and joy is the traditional liturgical color for Epiphany, the first Sunday after the Epiphany (the Baptism of our Lord), and the last Sunday after the Epiphany (the Transfiguration of our Lord). For the other Sundays of the season, green is normally used. Green represents the new life that Christ gives us in baptism, as well as the spiritual growth we experience during the season as we study the Lord's ministry of teaching, healing, and miracles. Some churches prefer using white on every Sunday of the Epiphany season and reserve green for the season after Pentecost.

WHY IS EPIPHANY SUCH A SPECIAL DAY AND SEASON?

Epiphany is one of the most important festivals of the liturgical year because it shows the church how God comes to His people. We are so full of sin and deserving of divine punishment that we cannot hope to approach God. Knowing that we cannot come to Him, God took the

initiative and came to us by becoming one of us. The most holy and almighty God condescended to take on human flesh in order to reveal His salvation to the world. This is the mystery of the Epiphany of our Lord.

During this season, Christians meditate on many of our Lord's epiphanies. Epiphany Day itself commemorates the arrival of the Magi in Bethlehem to worship the Messiah and bring Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh ([Matthew 2:1-12](#)). Since the earliest days of the church, these wise men have been considered to be representatives of all the peoples of the earth. By means of a miraculous star, God showed them that Jesus was born to be not only the King of the Jews, but the Lord and Savior of all nations.

The Baptism of our Lord is the first Sunday after the Epiphany. This important festival is the observance of Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist ([Mark 1:9-11](#)). The words of the Father and the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove as Jesus came out of the waters revealed Him to be God's true Son.

The Transfiguration of our Lord, the last Sunday after the Epiphany, is a celebration of the moment that Christ, in the company of Moses and Elijah, literally shined His glorious divine nature on Peter, James, and John, leaving them dazed and awestruck ([Luke 9:28-36](#)). This event, the greatest of Christ's epiphanies until His triumphant resurrection from the grave on Easter, serves as the dramatic conclusion of the season. Transfiguration Sunday stands in vivid contrast to what takes place just a few days later; Ash Wednesday, the day of sorrow and repentance that initiates the season of Lent.

In between the two Sundays that mark the Lord's baptism and transfiguration, the church concentrates on several of the other incidents from Scripture that show how Jesus manifested God's love to the world through His ministry of preaching, miracles, and healings. What is common to each of these epiphanies is that in one way or another they make known the identity and mission of Jesus Christ: True Man and True God, born into this sinful world to be the Lord and Savior of all humanity.

We begin to understand the joy and wonder of Epiphany when we read the story of Simeon ([Luke 2:22-35](#)). Simeon was a devout old man who lived in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the promised Messiah with his own eyes. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to be consecrated according to Jewish law regarding firstborn males ([Exodus 13:2](#)), Simeon realized that this infant was the Christ. In joyful response to this personal epiphany, the old man took the baby Jesus in his arms and chanted a magnificent song of thanksgiving best known by its Latin title, *Nunc Dimittis*. We at Saint Paul's, along with Lutheran Christians everywhere, sing Simeon's great canticle at the end of each service of Holy Communion. The words of the *Nunc Dimittis* remind us of the mercy and grace that God revealed to the world in His Son, Jesus Christ:

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, For mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation Which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: A light to lighten the Gentiles And the glory of Thy people Israel.

The words of the *Nunc Dimittis* are taken from pp 199-200 of [Lutheran Service Book, Concordia Publishing House](#), 2006.

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