*Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together; they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses’ arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you; the wealth of the nations shall come to you. 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.*

Isaiah 60:1-6

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, the Magi (astrologers) from the East came to Jerusalem, asking: “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed His star in the east (at its rising) and have come to pay Him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him: “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd (to rule) my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying: “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found Him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay Him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary His mother, and they knelt down and paid Him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.* Matthew 2:1-12

*The story is told of a woman who had finished shopping and returned to her car. She found four men inside the car. She dropped her shopping bags, drew a handgun, and screamed, “I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car.”*

*Those men did not wait for a second invitation; they got out and ran like crazy.*

*The woman, somewhat shaken, loaded her shopping bags and then got into the car. But no matter how she tried, she could not get her key into the ignition. Then it dawned on her: her car was parked four or five spaces away!* *She loaded her grocery bags into her own car and then drove to the police station to turn herself in. The desk sergeant to whom she told the story nearly fell off his chair laughing.*

*He pointed to the other end of the counter, where four men were reporting a carjacking by an old woman with thick glasses and curly white hair, less than five feet tall, and carrying a large handgun. No charges were filed.*

Well, these are the signs of our times.

Three Kings

1. On December 1st of last year, we officially commenced the celebrations of a Christmas Season with the First Sunday of Advent. Tomorrow, we will end this Christmas Season with the Holy Day of *“Epiphany,”* also known as the *“Three Kings”*, or the *“Three Wise Men”* festival, the *“Twelfth”* day of Christmas. Growing up in Poland this was the day when most of us would take down the Christmas decorations and remove the Christmas trees from homes. It was also a day when the Christmas holidays ended, and the school year would continue, following the *“Christmas break.”* For us, the preachers though, the Epiphany belongs again to the annual celebration, the time when we have to tackle the same story as we did on every previous year. I must admit, after over 40+ years of preaching it becomes harder and harder every year, to present a new *“take”* on the familiar story. Still, this is an important event, and we need to understand why we celebrate the day the three Magi arrived to Bethlehem.

2. There is something important here, something we need to see, something I point out to every year. The Magi do not belong in the *“Nativity Scene”* though, for their visit occurred about two years later than Jesus birth occurred. They came to Bethlehem when Jesus was probably two years old as we read in Matthew in 2:16: *“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.”* His words would indicate that the Magi arrived to Bethlehem about two years after Jesus was born, and historically this would make sense since they traveled from the foreign countries, following the star that appeared with Jesus’ birth and in the biblical times the only means of travel would be by a camel, a caravan, or simply by walking. Such a journey would therefore require a substantial amount of time to pass for the *“Three Kings”* to reach their destination.

3. In the Old Testament reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah we find that in the midst of *“darkness”* the *“Light”* has shone upon the world. The visit of these three scholars, for that is who they truly were, shows us vividly that Jesus, the Emmanuel, *“God with Us,”* as Isaiah calls Him, had come to bring the new life, to illuminate the truth that has been forgotten by His people, and to usher the world into the new era, where the broken relationship between God and His people has been restored. When Isaiah delivered his words to the Jews, they were experiencing a terrible tragedy, they were exiled to a foreign land, but although they might have been disillusioned with their fate, not everything was totally lost. Isaiah says: *“your light has come.”* With these words he assured the people, and consequently also us, that his prophecy, as given by God will surely come to pass. I recently learned about a *“Luxor Sky Beam,”* installed on the top of the Luxor Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas to be the strongest in the world, and visible by the pilots of the planes as far as Los Angeles, 275 miles away. As powerful as this *“beam”* might be, it is inconsequential in comparison to the *“Light”* that Jesus Christ offered to the entire world when He was born.

4. The Magi recognized His *“Light,”* they recognized Jesus as the Messiah, the King, by recognizing first the light of the star that appeared on the heavenly firmament when He was born. So many others missed it though, including the Jewish scholars who only when inquired by Herod were able to rediscover an ancient obscure text from the prophet Micah: *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”* For Herod who also did not recognize the Messiah’s arrival, Micah’s prophecy became a threat, and he became more than perturbed. The Magi were on the other hand overjoyed hearing that prophecy. After such a lengthy voyage, travelling from the East and following the star that promised them such great reward for their struggles, they must have been thrilled. Leaving Herod’s palace in Jerusalem and once again seeing the star in the sky, their joy must have overtaken them completely.

5. The Magi knew about the birth of the *“King”* following the discovery of what we refer to today as the *“Bethlehem’s Star,”* but not until they entered the house where Jesus was, that they experienced the wonder of truly seeing and meeting Him. They knew that Jesus’ birth was special and that they had to go to see, and to experience His presence for themselves. The gifts they brough to this *“King,”* were not only symbolic but also of a great value. All three gifts they brought, where usually offered to the royalty. Myrrh was commonly used as an anointing oil, frankincense was used as a perfume, and gold always was a commodity with great value. They had a spiritual meaning as well though. The gold was a symbol of a kingship on earth, the frankincense as an incense symbolized the deity, and the myrrh, used as an embalming oil, symbolized death. These Magi knew that His coming would cause a great joy to the people, so, they offered Him gold. They knew that He would have close relationship with God, so they gave Him the frankincense. They also knew that He would endure the pain of death, so they gave Him myrrh. How do I know these? Because I believe that they knew the Jewish Scriptures even before they came to Jerusalem, and after their meeting with the Jewish scholars at the court of Herod, they most certainly gathered more knowledge, whatever the other Scriptures would offer, and they might have missed. Remember, they were the scholars, and that is what the true scholars do.

6. The star that the *“Three Kings*” followed brought them to Jesus and even though we today might not see that *“Bethlehem’s Star”* in the sky anymore like they did, the *“Light”* of Jesus is still visible to all those who want to see it. This *“Light”* tells us that the only way to Jesus is through the prayer, repentance, and true confession. As a matter of fact, Jesus still welcomes us when we come to Him just as He welcomed the *“Three Wise Men”* when they came to His home.The star led these men to Jesus child, while the light of Jesus leads us to the intimate personal communication with Him as our Savior and to the personal experience of Him in our lives. If we observe Epiphany on annual basis, it is because we observe the light of God that has broken into the world of darkness, the world swayed by sin and becoming visible to all who want to see and to experience Him. It reminds us of the importance of being able to shine God’s *“Light”* through us, so that the other people may also come to Him. The story of the Magi from the East is still relevant and important today, two thousand years later, because our society must humbly return to God and to His *“Light.”* Our society must embrace Jesus Christ as our Savior, once again.

7. On the first Christmas celebration the shepherds came to Bethlehem to the barn where Jesus was born, and they worshipped Him. They did it as the lowest members of the society of the time. About two years later the Magi did the same, committing themselves to the old plan designed by God long time before. As the Christ’s Church we too have to come to Him in the fulness of our time and to begin a life journey knowing who our Savior is, and what He has done for us. On the first Christmas the shepherds might not have brought any gifts to Jesus, but they worshipped Him, even if long before He engaged in His ministry. The Magi brought Him the gifts worthy of a royalty and recognized Him as the King but of the spiritual rather than visible realm. It is not by chance that we keep the tradition of giving presents at Christmas time, and it is not because of Santa, but because just as Jesus was offered the gifts from the Magi, He Himself has become a gift to us all. So, with Christmas gifts we remember Him as the receiver and the giver of the greatest gift.