

Title: “The 12 Days of Christmas – From Christmas to Epiphany”

Key verses:

John 1:32 (NKJV) – “And John bore witness, saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him [Jesus].’”

Matthew 2:2 (NKJV) – “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

Good morning, everyone. And Merry Christmas. Yes, I said “Merry Christmas” once again. Maybe you think that because Christmas day was yesterday then that means that all the festivities are now over. But ... not according to the “traditional Christian calendar.” According to the traditional calendar, today – the day after Christmas – is the “first day of Christmas,” the first of 12 days between Christmas day and the holiday called “Epiphany” on January 6th. I know all of you have heard of Christmas, but I would like to ask you: how many of you know the day of Epiphany? If you have heard of Epiphany and you know what it celebrates, please raise your hand. (Don’t be shy: if you have heard of Epiphany, please raise your hand. Thank you).

If you don’t know what Epiphany is, I can’t blame you. I also didn’t know what it was until long after I had reached adulthood. We in the Protestant evangelical movement don’t pay much attention to a lot of these old traditions, including the “traditional Christian calendar.” We celebrate Easter and Christmas, which commemorate two crucially important events in salvation history: the death and resurrection of Christ on the one hand, and the birth of Christ on the other. Some evangelical churches, like OIC, also celebrate Advent, a time to anticipate the coming of Christ and His birth in Bethlehem. But for the most part, we evangelicals don’t pay attention to some of these other special days on the traditional calendar. Well, many of you know that I love church history, so today I’m going to share with you some lessons I’ve learned from church history.

I have entitled today’s message “The 12 Days of Christmas – From Christmas to Epiphany.” The main focus of today’s message will be the day of Epiphany, but before I do that, I would like to talk a little bit about Advent. As originally conceived, Advent is a season during which we anticipate the coming of the Savior. And, traditionally, the main activity during Advent is not shopping or celebrating or gift-giving. The main activity is ... “watching and waiting.” It is the season for preparing oneself for the coming of the Savior. And not just the coming of Christ at His birth in Bethlehem, but also His second coming, when Christ returns to establish His kingdom and also bring judgment. Pastor Alistair mentioned this last Sunday. During the Advent season, we look forward to the birth of Christ and we also remind ourselves that we are supposed to be ready for His second coming as well. Then, when Christmas arrives, traditionally that’s when celebrations begin ... that’s when the “12 Days of Christmas” occur. I am sure you know the popular Christmas song entitled “The 12 Days of Christmas.” This song describes gift-giving during the days after Christmas, up until the Day of Epiphany. When I was a child, I was rather confused by that song, because in my family and in my church, we celebrated *before* Christmas and we had no recognition of the days between Christmas and Epiphany. Today, I am going to share with you some of the heritage behind the way this season was celebrated in years gone by. I am not advocating that we go back to older ways of celebrating this season, but I would like to share some of this history with you.

In the next five minutes of today’s message, I would like to describe for you a little bit of how the traditional Christian calendar came about. Of course, the calendar itself is a man-made construct and is not something mandated in the Bible – we are not obliged to have a yearly celebration of any of these traditional holidays. However, the holidays on the Christian calendar are designed to commemorate important events that did take place in space and time two thousand years ago, and in

that sense it is valuable to have these regular commemorations. This is a part of Christian heritage, and so today I would like to share some of this with you: the origins of what became the traditional Christian calendar. And that story begins with the most important event of human history, the resurrection of Christ.

You remember the story well. The Gospel records tell us that after the Sabbath day, on the morning of the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb of Jesus and discovered that it was empty. An angel told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. From the first century onward in Christian practice, the first day of the week has been known as “the Lord’s day” and is a weekly celebration of the resurrection of Christ. You find “the Lord’s day” specifically mentioned in Revelation 1:10. You see Christians gathering on the first day of the week in Acts 20:7 and 1st Corinthians 16:2. It is significant to Christians that this is the day after the Sabbath day (which is the seventh day), and so the day of resurrection has sometimes been called “the eighth day” and is sometimes seen as a sort of first day of a new creation week, since it is the inauguration of a new era of human history.

Very soon in Christian history (at least by the second century), Christians were celebrating the Resurrection in a yearly commemoration, taking place some time around the Jewish Passover festival. Initially, there were some differing practices among the Christians about which day they would celebrate Easter. Eventually, the church decided that the date for Easter would be the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after March 21st. This is why the date for Easter is different each year, falling on a Sunday some time between late March and late April.

The next major holiday after Easter is Pentecost. The original Jewish holiday was known as the Day of First Fruits, when the people were commanded in Leviticus 23:16 to present to the Lord a grain offering from the harvest. Pentecost occurs fifty days after the Passover and it is significant to Christians since that is the day in Acts chapter 2 when the Holy Spirit came down on the disciples. It is considered the birthday of the church. Pentecost Sunday has been regularly commemorated by Christians since the first century.

In the early centuries of the Christian era, the next holiday to receive regular commemoration was the day of Epiphany. Such commemorations seem to have started by the end of the second century. This happened before there was a separate day called Christmas (which began to be celebrated separately in the fourth century).

And now we come to the focus of my sermon today. Unlike Easter and Pentecost, Epiphany does not have a connection to a prior Jewish festival. It seems that the date for Epiphany was chosen largely because in the weeks after the winter solstice on December 21st, the days begin getting longer. Jesus is the “Light of the World,” and so Christians decided it was a good time to celebrate the coming of Jesus to the world.

The word “Epiphany” means “manifestation” or “appearing” or “revealing.” Manifestation / appearing / revealing. A related Greek word is “Theophany,” which literally means “the manifestation of God to a worshipper.” This day commemorates the various ways in which God has been manifested to the world through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Can you think of some examples in Scripture of how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has been manifested to the world? If I were teaching a small group Bible study class right now, I would ask people to give me some examples and I would write those ideas on a whiteboard. But, we are in a different setting today, here in this auditorium, so I can’t do that. So, I will propose some ideas myself, but I would like you to think about how you would answer the questions I’m going to ask. My main question is this: As recorded in the Scriptures, in what ways has Jesus Christ, the Son of God, been manifested/revealed to the world?

One suggestion of how Jesus is manifested to the world might be through His miracles, displaying God's power.

Another example would be how the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus right after His baptism in the Jordan River. In Mark 1:9-11 (ESV) we read – “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’.”

Here we see the Holy Spirit descending from heaven in bodily form, like a dove, and resting on Jesus. Then a voice could be heard coming from heaven: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” This surely is one of the best examples of an epiphany. In Eastern Orthodox terminology, this event is specifically called a theophany, a manifestation of God to human beings. Indeed ... did you notice that we have in this scene all three members of the Trinity? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Can you think of other examples in Scripture of how Jesus was manifested to the world? How about at His very first miracle, at the wedding feast in Cana, when He turned water into wine? John 2:11 (NASB) says – “This beginning of His signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and revealed His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.” The Greek word here translated “revealed” is the word “ephanerosen,” related to “epiphany.” And notice that it says here that “His disciples believed in Him.” They saw with their own eyes a manifestation of Jesus's power, of His glory. So, they could put their trust in Him and follow Him.

What are some other manifestations of Jesus, the Son of God? How about His birth, His entry into this world in human form? God become man. John 1:1-2 (NKJV) – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God.” Verse 14 – “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” “The Word” – this is a reference to God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. The Word ... became flesh. And ... the Word dwelt among us. God Himself became man and dwelt among mankind. I will talk more about that later.

Well, I have shared with you some of the ways in which Jesus, the Son of God, was manifested to the world. In the ancient church, when the Day of Epiphany was celebrated in the beginning, it was these three events which were being commemorated together: the birth of Christ, the baptism of Christ, and the first miracle at Cana in Galilee. In a sense, Epiphany was the first Christmas, before Christmas was separated from Epiphany in the fourth century and began to be celebrated on December 25th.

A few minutes ago, when I asked you to think of examples of an epiphany, I wonder if any of you thought of the Transfiguration in Matthew 17. That was when Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain and was transfigured before them. They heard a voice from heaven say, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; hear Him!” (Matthew 17:5, NASB). It would be fair to call this event also an epiphany; however, the audience was small and private. This is not a part of the commemoration on the Day of Epiphany on January 6th. However, in the more traditional churches, the Sundays after Epiphany are known as the Epiphany season, and the official Gospel reading on the last Sunday of the Epiphany season is about the Transfiguration.

I have one more example to share with you. How many of you thought of the star which appeared to the wise men in the East? The visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus was not originally part of the

Epiphany celebrations, but it was incorporated later on. In fact, today, in the Western churches, the Day of Epiphany has become primarily a commemoration of the visit of the wise men. Meanwhile, in the Eastern churches, the focus of this day is the baptism of Jesus. As for the miracle in Cana, that is now commemorated on the second Sunday of the Epiphany season, not on this day.

In the remainder of my message today, I would like to focus on three main Epiphany events: the birth of Christ, the visit of the wise men, and His baptism.

A. The birth of Jesus Christ – The Incarnation of the Son of God

I mentioned earlier that the central point of human history is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His death paid the penalty for our sin and His resurrection proves that He has conquered sin and death, so we have confidence that those who have put their faith in Him will receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Easter has always been, for me, the most wonderful news and the most wonderful event to be commemorated, and every year I enjoy that celebration. In contrast, Christmas is not so interesting to me. The birth of a baby is a happy event, but it seems to me that all the attention that Christmas receives overshadows the more important event of Easter.

However, in recent years, my attitude has begun to change. If there had not been a Christmas, there would not have been an Easter. But, it's more than just that. Yes, the savior needed to be born in order to live His life and fulfill our redemption on the cross. Yes, His birth fulfilled the prophecies made about the coming Messiah. But, what has captured my attention in recent years is that this birth is the incarnation of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity taking on human flesh. He could have been incarnated in a different manner, I suppose, maybe by just creating a grown-up human body and inhabiting that body. But, if He had done it that way, He would not have been able to identify with us human beings and experienced everything we experience. But by being born, by experiencing childhood and growing up, experiencing the problems we all go through, from hunger to fatigue to temptation, etc., He completely identified with our human condition.

Hebrews 2:14 (ESV) – “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.”

Verses 17-18 – “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Hebrews 4:14-15 (ESV) – “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

Jesus completely identified with us, He overcame temptation and He can help us who face temptations. I find this really comforting and encouraging. God the Son faced everything we face, yet He overcame temptation. He helps us to avoid falling into sin

We are talking here of the Second Person of the Trinity. He came down to earth to take on human flesh. Many people have difficulty conceiving how Jesus can be both fully God and fully human. They look at verses that seem to show Jesus with less knowledge or less power than God has, so He must be less than God. For example, Mark 13:32 (ESV) – “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Those people who wish to deny that Jesus is fully God will point to such verses and say that these show that Jesus had

limited knowledge and therefore cannot be God. But such individual verses don't bother me. I like to point people to one of my favorite passages of Scripture.

Philippians 2:5-8 (ESV) – “Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be held on to for advantage, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

I like the image painted here, of the Second Person of the Trinity emptying himself, taking off his divine form and putting on human form, humbling Himself by taking on human form, and then even suffering the most humiliating kind of death. He did all this in order to redeem fallen humanity.

In the fourth century, there was a major challenge to the notion of the full divinity of Christ, a challenge brought about by a preacher named Arius. The famous Council of Nicaea was called to discuss this matter and the hero of that council and of Trinitarian theology was a man named Athanasius – we call him Saint Athanasius. The council concluded that Christ is “eternally begotten of the Father” and “co-eternal with the Father,” and “of the same substance” as the Father. While arguing that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, Athanasius made the following statement: “Whatever has not been assumed has not been redeemed.” This means that God the Son had to take on human form in order to redeem human beings. This is an extremely important assertion to make: in order to save human beings, God Himself had to take on human flesh. One of the most important books written by Athanasius is entitled “On the Incarnation of the Word.”

Two thousand years ago, in that stable in Bethlehem, the Word of God became flesh, and was born into this world. The doctrine of the incarnation is crucial to Christianity.

Next:

B. The Visit of the Magi (the wise men)

Matthew 2:1-2 (NASB) – “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² ‘Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him’.”

Thus begins a remarkable story. Here, a group of men called “magi” arrive from the east and inquire about “He who has been born King of the Jews.” The marginal note of the New American Standard Bible calls these magi “A caste of educated men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural science.” They are mentioned several times in the book of Daniel. For example, in Daniel chapter 1 (NASB), verses 19 and 20, we read this about Daniel and his three compatriots: “And the king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; so they entered the king’s personal service. ²⁰ And as for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm.” This word “magician” appears five or six times in my English Bible in Daniel, and 40 years ago I took a pencil and carefully crossed out the second half of the word “magician” each place where the word occurs, leaving only the letters m-a-g-i (magi). These “magicians and conjurers” are likely the forerunners of the magi mentioned in Matthew chapter 2. It is remarkable to me how God could use these Gentile astrologers to reveal to them the birth of the King of the Jews (a title that some of the Jews at that time were using as one way to refer to the coming Messiah). In fact, many years ago, as I read through the Old Testament, I often found it remarkable how often God seemed to care about Gentiles. We usually think of the Old Testament as the story of the Chosen People of Israel, but there are many places where God

shows His concern for Gentiles. So much so that a few years ago I decided I would like to do a sermon some time entitled “God loves the Gentiles,” so that I can share with you some surprising verses in the Old Testament that I have found on this theme.

And of course, here in the New Testament, we read this story of the magi, and we read also how the Jewish Messiah has opened to the Gentiles a way of participation in the Kingdom of God. For example, Ephesians 2:11-14 (NASB) – “Therefore remember that previously you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘Uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘Circumcision’ which is performed in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the people of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who previously were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.¹⁴ For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall.” We heard these verses read just a few weeks ago during the lighting of one of the Advent candles. It is wonderful that now the Gentiles have been given the opportunity to be included in God’s Kingdom. And the Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28, we see that Jesus tells the apostles to “make disciples of all nations.” All nations are now welcome to enter into relationship with God.

The topic of my sermon today is the Epiphany, the manifestation of God through Jesus Christ. And here we see how God revealed to these magi the birth of the King of the Jews.

We must move on to the next section:

C. The Baptism of Jesus Christ

Luke 3:1-4 (NASB) – “Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,² in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.³ And he came into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight”.’”

First, notice how the Gospel writer Luke situates his account as taking place in space and time during the reign of Tiberius Caesar and the governorship of Pontius Pilate. These are events that took place in space and time. And John’s message is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This is a message to all of us: to repent and turn away from our sins and be baptized.

Matthew 3:13-17 (NKJV) – “Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.¹⁴ And John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?”¹⁵ But Jesus answered and said to him, “Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed Him.¹⁶ When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.¹⁷ And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Jesus came to John to be baptized, not because He needed to repent (John knew Jesus didn’t need that). Apparently, Jesus wanted this done to be an example to us. And maybe for something more.

Let’s listen to the testimony of John the Baptist. John 1:29 (NKJV) – “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” Verses 32-34 – “And John bore witness, saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him.³³ I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water

said to me, “Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.”³⁴ And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God’.”

This is the Epiphany, the Theophany, the manifestation of God through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, guiding Him for His next three years of ministry. And then Jesus promises to give to His disciples “another Comforter” in John chapter 14 – the Holy Spirit. And then in Acts chapter 2, the Holy Spirit comes upon all the disciples gathered in the Upper Room, empowering them for ministry and for changing the world.

Let us return to the message of John the Baptist, who preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He said in Matthew 3:2 (NASB) – “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The Kingdom of heaven has come near. This is the message we now preach: the Messiah has come, the Kingdom of God has come near, repent from your sins and you will be forgiven. If any of you have not yet taken this step, you can do so today. At the back of the Hall, you see the “Lift” sign. Anyone having any need can go there after the service and someone will be there to pray with you and talk with you about any need you may have. Come to Jesus today. God bless you.