**Gospel**: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6‘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 my people Israel.’” 7Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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 at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

**Message**: Epiphany!

 A favorite children’s book is The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams. One very moving passage between the old Skin Horse and the Velveteen Rabbit occurs in the nursery. “*What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-pull handle?” REAL isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.” “Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit. “Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.” “Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?” “It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You* ***become****. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly except to people who don’t understand. . . . and once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”*

 We have always been REAL to Jesus. When did Jesus become REAL to you? That moment was an epiphany. Have you shared that moment with anyone? That’s “testimony” that may lead to an epiphany for a person. An epiphany, particularly a personal epiphany in the Christian tradition, is a powerful proclamation of one’s up-close experience with/of the Divine. Try to remember the moment or a subsequent moment when you realized how much Jesus really really loves you. Did it hurt? Had all your hair been rubbed off? Had you been searching, or did it just happen?

 The Magi, through Matthew’s gospel, and Paul, through his personal testimony, share their epiphany and how their experience of Jesus benefits us in our Christian walk, how Jesus makes us REAL. The Magi were scholars, motivated and dedicated to study. Research and study were not merely an activity to pass time on occasion. These were deliberate acts of their daily lives. We also have opportunity to do likewise, perhaps not eight hours of our day, but Scripture reading, morning devotionals, a study group, prayer group all constitute a personal commitment to delving deeper into the divine mystery. The Magi were scientists, observant of the world around them including taking notes on the cosmic world above them—and taking notes on their observations on earth. We too see the world around us locally and far away. In conjunction with observing the ways of the world, the Magi had searched the various sacred texts, applied what they had learned to the “now” and, based on their studies, were willing to recognize a sign when it appeared. Ultimately, they took a risk and followed the sign. Was it a star, a comet, a conjunction, an angel pointing the way? Nevertheless, they were responded by following the light that led them to their epiphany.

 God has many unique ways of showing us the direction we should travel in order to meet Jesus. The Magi knew this light they followed would lead to a very special king; little did they know just how special this child whom they sought would be. They even asked for directions, though both Herod and the priests declined to journey with them. We ask for guidance along the way as we continue the journey. They also brought gifts; nothing practical like diapers and a casserole; no cute toys to play with; nothing symbolic indicating royalty, divinity and death (history has added that), but just really really nice gifts—things that are precious. What precious gifts do you have to bring to Jesus?

 Paul shared his epiphany. His letters speak of the “mystery” that has been revealed. This mystery is not the television program or movie or novel depicting one or several working to apprehend a criminal, to discover “*who done it*.” This mystery is not a case to be solved or a problem requiring a search for a solution. This mystery does include twists and turns that cause one to delve deeper, to explore, to search, and take risks. This **mystery** of faith, as Paul relates his powerful testimony, leads to a greater **comprehension** or insight into God through Jesus Christ. Paul was **struck** by a sudden light while on the road to Damascus. The Magi were **led** by a light that took them to Bethlehem. Both paths took them **to** Jesus where they gained the insight and understanding that **God is determined** to be found. In a mystery novel, the protagonist apprehends or captures the criminal. In the **mystery** of faith **we** are the ones who are apprehended **by Jesus**. That’s an epiphany, when we realize we have been captured by Jesus and cannot escape the justice of his love. It is not a game; the contest has been won; the problem solved. Rejoice and share the experience.

 Once we realize Jesus has captured us body, soul and spirit, the epiphany continues to be unveiled in our **release** of all our burdens to the power of Christ, **relief** that we are not alone and that we are dearly loved, and the **surrender** of our life to Christ’s light that has led us to this moment of greater understanding. Our epiphany is a sacrament in which we are made holy. As in the Lord’s Supper where we share simple elements of bread and cup, it is not the act itself set up to accomplish a goal; life in Jesus Christ, symbolized in this holy meal, is the mystery that solves us—we are given opportunity to draw closer to each other and to find access to Jesus Christ in whom we draw closer to God, often in the simplest of ways. (For me, the efforts of this congregation to quickly rearrange this dining room for Christmas Eve worship was an Epiphany.) After this (or these) high spiritual moment(s)--every time we experience a deeper revelation of God through Jesus Christ—as the Magi, having met Jesus, went home by a different route to avoid the evils of Herod, and Paul traveled with Gentiles rather than the Jews, we too travel a different more focused path, having become REAL in the love of Jesus Christ. The Lord be with you. Amen.

**Prayers of the People**: Holy Lord, you are the Spirit of renewal. We lift to you this day and every day, those who are suffering, those who are lost, those who are found, those who rejoice, all who come to you in love, grant us grace in all our words and deeds may we seek your glory and the coming of your kingdom through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Prayer of Thanksgiving**: All things come from you, O God, and with gratitude we return to you what is yours. And so, in gratitude for all your gifts, we cheerfully offer you ourselves and all that we have in union with Christ’s offering for us, through Jesus our Lord, Amen.

**Benediction**: Before us and behind us it is blessed. Below us and above us, it is blessed. Around us it is blessed as we set out with Christ. We set out on a path for a holy place indeed. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, go along that path to love and serve the Lord.

**Old Testament**: Isaiah 60:1-9

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. 3Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. 4Lift 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 on their nurses’ arms. 5Then 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. 6A 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. 7All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house. 8Who are these that fly like a cloud, and like doves to their windows?

9For the coastlands shall wait for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from far away, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has glorified you.

**New Testament**: Ephesians 3:1-12

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, 3and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.