

A SERMON PREACHED ON JANUARY 6, 2019, AT BETHANY

BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A woman came into the beauty shop one day to get her hair fixed. Her beautician was noted to always be complaining about most everything. The customer stated that she was planning on leaving for Rome in a few days to get a fresh new start on the new year.

Beautician: Rome...Rome...Why that is one of the dirtiest cities you could ever go to. How are you going to get there?

Customer: We are flying American Airlines.

Beautician: American...They are the worst airline! And they have the most unattractive stewardesses. Where are you staying?

Customer: We are staying in the Villa.

Beautician: Villa...Villa! Why that is so overrated and way too expensive. I wouldn't stay there if I were you. What are you going to see?

Customer: We are planning on seeing the Pope.

Beautician: Why girl, you would be lucky to even see him from long distance. Don't you know everyone wants to be around him. You won't be able to get within a mile of him.

A month went by and the customer went back to the beautician, hoping to tell her trip and all the new things she had seen and experienced. The beautician asked her what she has been doing and the customer replied that she had just got back from Rome.

Beautician: Rome...I bet your flight was bad she pronounced with a tinge of snobbery.

Customer: No, the flight was great. They had actually overbooked the flights and gave us first class seating and fed us champagne and lobster all the way to Rome. And our flight assistant was the most handsome man I had ever seen!

Beautician: Well. What about the Villa?

Customer: Funny you should ask. The Villa had just completed a \$5 million restoration and upgrade. What a spectacular new look!. They were also overbooked and we were forced to stay in the owner's personal villa. Wow! The accommodations, the service, we had everything, we lived like royalty!

Beautician: Well...what about the Pope?

Customer: We took the tour to the Vatican. One of the guards tapped us on the shoulder and stated, “The Pope often entertains a few people now and then, would like to have a personal visit with the Pope?”

Beautician: What? Preposterous! I can’t believe that. What did the Pope say?

Customer: He took one look at me and asked, “That’s the worst hair-do I have ever seen! Who fixed your hair?”<sup>i</sup>

Christmas and New Year’s are just over and it seems as if the holidays are now far away. But today we have our first holiday of the year as we look forward to preparing for 2019 and all it has to offer. Epiphany 2019, or as it is known in some quarters as the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, 3 King’s Day, or “Little Christmas.” Epiphany means “manifestation. On this day we celebrate the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles - - that is to all the nations. Most Protestant churches do not celebrate an Epiphany (nor for that matter, a Pentecost liturgical season), opting instead to mark the time of the season (fifth Sunday of Epiphany for example). Here’s a bit of Epiphany trivia I did not know. In Eastern Europe and Russia winter swimming is part of the celebration. Competitions for winter swimming also exist. Winter swimming is the activity of swimming during the winter season, typically in outdoor locations (open water swimming) or in unheated pools or lidos. In colder countries it may be synonymous with ice swimming, when the water is frozen over. This requires either breaking the ice or entering where a spring prevents the formation of ice. It may also be simulated by a pool of water at 32 °F, the temperature at which water freezes.<sup>ii</sup> So, our polar bear plunge at Bethany Beach has Epiphany origins!

Also, if you’re Scottish, you may be aware of the chalking of houses which also has its origins in Epiphany. Blogger Jamie Skojec at IPeter5.com says “If you’ve come from a Catholic background or lived in a Catholic neighborhood, **you’ve probably seen it**: a mysterious series of letters and numbers, looking for all the world like an equation, inscribed in chalk over a doorway at your parish, or at the home of a friend. Maybe you thought you could figure it out. Maybe you were too embarrassed to ask, “What the heck *is* that?” If you don’t know what the chalk is all about, don’t be ashamed. You’re certainly not alone.

Epiphany marks the occasion of a time-honored Christian tradition of “chalking the doors.” The formula for the ritual — adapted for 2019 — is simple: take chalk of any color and write the following above the entrance of your home: **20 + C + M + B + 19**. The letters have two meanings. First, they represent the initials of the Magi — Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar — who came to visit Jesus in His first home. They also abbreviate the Latin phrase, *Christus mansionem benedicat*: “May Christ bless the house.” The “+” signs represent the cross, and the “20” at the beginning and the “19” at the end mark the year. Taken together, this inscription is performed as a request for Christ to bless those homes so marked and that He stay with those who dwell therein throughout the entire year. The chalking of the doors is a centuries-old practice throughout the world, though it appears to be somewhat less well-known in the United States. It is, however, an easy tradition to adopt, and a great practice whereby we dedicate our

year to God from its very outset, asking God's blessing on our homes and on all who live, work, or visit them there.

Traditionally the blessing is done by either a minister or the father of the family on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. This blessing can be performed simply by just writing the inscription and offering a short prayer, or more elaborately, including songs, prayers, processions, the burning of incense, and the sprinkling of holy water.

Practicing traditions like the chalking of the doors helps us to live our Faith more concretely and serve as an outward sign of our dedication to Our Lord. Our homes are also the place where many of us will make the greatest strides in our spiritual growth, through observance of daily prayer, spiritual reading, and work offered as an oblation to God. The chalking of the doors of a home encourages Christians to dedicate their life at home to God and to others. Seeing the symbols over our doors can help to remind us, while passing in and out on our daily routines, that our homes and all those who dwell there belong to Christ. It also serves as a reminder of welcoming the Magi gave to Jesus. We should strive to be as welcoming to all who come to our homes to visit us!<sup>iii</sup> It seems kind of Druid-like, I know. But it is one more tradition we can add to our liturgy, maybe next year for Epiphany! Ushers hand out the chalk, please!

We could accomplish this during the Epiphany season next year, perhaps with the classic BBCC way to celebrate: food. Nearly every Christian country, especially in the Eastern Orthodox Church, has its own Epiphany food tradition. My favorite comes from Europe, from Poland, to be exact, and is known as **Trzech Króli**, a bundt cake served with a coin or almond baked inside. The one who gets it is king or queen for the day and will be lucky in the coming year. In the U.S., the lucky one must provide the King Cake for the next party or the next year. Recipes for these desserts vary by region. Some serve a French puff pastry-type cake with almond paste filling. Others favor a sponge cake with almond cream filling, and yet others enjoy a light fruitcake, (the best!).<sup>iv</sup>

Lest you think I've forgotten what the Epiphany season is all about from a biblical perspective, I haven't. I just find it more interesting to discover where what we celebrate and have made part of our lives comes from. With regard to Jesus' birth narrative, there are three found in the gospels, two of which (Matthew and Luke) share the same back text. According to the Gospel of Matthew that we heard read this morning the three wise men followed the star of Bethlehem across the desert to meet the baby Jesus, offering gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gifts were symbolic of the importance of Jesus' birth, the gold representing his royal standing; frankincense his divine birth; and myrrh his mortality. The word Epiphany or revelation celebrates 'the revelation of God in his Son as human in Jesus Christ'. The six Sundays which follow Epiphany are known as the time of manifestation; the last Sunday of the Epiphany is celebrated as Transfiguration Sunday.<sup>v</sup> There you have it in a nutshell, except for those pesky king guys. Much has been written about them over the years. After Jesus was born, Wise Men came to look for Him, probably from an area which is now in either Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia or the Yemen. Although they are often called the 'Three Kings', the Bible does not say how many there were, or that they were kings. One theory is that they might have been Kings of the

Yemen, as during this time the Kings of Yemen were Jews. Three is only a guess because they brought with them three gifts: but however many there were of them, they probably would have had many more servants with them.

They were certainly men of great learning. The word Magi comes from the greek word 'magos' (where the english word 'magic' comes from). This was the title given to priests in a sect of the ancient Persian religions such as Zoroastrianism. Today we'd called them astrologers. Back then astronomy and astrology were part of the same overall studies (and 'science') and went hand in hand with each other. The magi would have followed the patterns of the stars religiously. They would have also probably been very rich and held in high esteem in their own society and by people who weren't from their country or religion.

They had seen an unusual new star in the sky, and knew that it told of the birth of a special king in Israel. No one really knows what the new star in the sky was, and there are many theories including comets, supernovas, a conjunction of planets or something supernatural! The Magi would have known about the prophesies of a special Jewish Savior (also known as the Messiah) from when the Jews had been held captive in ancient Babylon several hundred years before.

Legends are told about them and they have been given names. This is how they are often described:

- Gaspar (or Caspar), who has brown hair and a brown beard (or no beard!) and wears a green cloak and a gold crown with green jewels on it. He is the King of Sheba.
- Melchior, who has long white hair and a white beard and wears a gold cloak. He is the King of Arabia.
- Balthazar, who has black skin and a black beard (or no beard!) and wears a purple cloak. He is the King of Tarsus and Egypt.<sup>vi</sup>
- However you name them or count them, the bible has really very little to say about this caste of Zoroastrians. That their arrival and presence before Jesus is seen also as a precursor to the events surrounding the resurrection becomes clearer later in the story.
- Now you know as much about them as you'll need to get through a round of *Jeopardy!* or the first semester of seminary New Testament studies. And as much about Epiphany as most anyone else.
- Except when to take the tree down. There is a big to do in England currently about which is the right day, with op-eds and tv star interviews. The good news: unless you're a purist, you're not late. But whatever you do don't have any old or discarded wrapping paper hanging around - - it's a year's bad luck if you're caught!
- Happy New Year!
- Amen.
- (The Rev. Dr.) Rayner W. Hesse, Jr.
- Pastor, BCC
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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pastoralcareinc.com/resources/sermon-helps/jokes-for-sermons/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swimming>

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<sup>iii</sup> <https://onepeterfive.com/the-chalking-of-the-doors-an-epiphany-tradition-explained/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.thespruceeats.com/polish-three-kings-cake-recipe-1136951>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/christmas/0/twelfth-night-should-take-christmas-decorations-epiphany/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.whychristmas.com/story/wisemen.shtml>