

“Second Christmas”
Matthew 2:1-12
January 7, 2018
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I will admit to being a bit of a nerd about the Lord of the Rings. When I was a teenager I first read JRR Tolkein's fantasy trilogy and I loved it. As an adult, I've seen the movies and I love them too. My daughter Kendall and I want to travel to New Zealand someday just so we can go on a “Lord of the Rings Tour,” and visit all the locations that they used in filming the movies. I love the stories, the heroic quest, and I love the characters, especially the hobbits. One of my favorite scenes in the first movie comes when the four hobbits are led into the wilderness by their guide, Strider. At one point the hobbits begin to unpack their baggage from their donkey. Strider turns around and seeing them says, “Gentlemen, we do not stop until nightfall.” Then one of the hobbits says, “What about breakfast?” Strider says, “We've already had it.” The hobbit replies, “We've had one, yes. What about second breakfast?” Strider, perhaps not knowing that hobbits like to have six meals a day, just looks at them like they are a bit crazy.

So, Merry Christmas! Or Merry Second Christmas! Of course, for us Christmas was thirteen days ago and is already fading. How many of us have already taken down the tree and the lights? Is the family room or the living room back to normal? Do you still have any remains of the Christmas ham or turkey? Christmas is over, isn't it? Well, maybe not. Actually, it depends on what calendar you use. Calendars are interesting things, especially for nerds like me. How did people decide how long a year was? By watching the sun and the moon, right? Figuring out the length of days and when the shortest and longest days were. It took astronomers and politicians getting together to figure it out, but since before the time of Jesus the Roman Empire began to use what is called the Julian Calendar. The emperor Julius Caesar made the entire Roman Empire adopt the same way of counting days and years and being emperor, he named it after himself. In this way of reckoning according to the Julian Calendar, there are 365 days in each year. But even in those days, it was known that a year was a little

bit longer than 365 days, it's actually $365 \frac{1}{4}$ days and so Julius had every fourth year add an extra day. This was added to the last month of the year, which in those days was February. Thus began the concept of the leap day and the leap year—adding a day every four years. That's still what we do today, right? Every four years we add a day and we get February 29th. Except that doesn't really work. Because a solar year is not really $365 \frac{1}{4}$ days long. It's actually a bit shorter, approximately 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 45 seconds. Now that doesn't seem like much and you wouldn't notice it from year to year, but over the centuries it adds up. The Julian Calendar has too many leap years. And that matters to farmers and sailors and people who need to know when the first day of Spring is, or when winter will arrive. They needed a calendar that wouldn't have leap years in years divisible by 100. So the years ending in 00 would not be leap years unless they were also divisible by 400. Get it? 1700, and 1800 and 1900 would not be leap years but 2000 would be. When we get to 2100, it won't be a leap year. So in the 1500's they made a change. Pope Gregory in Rome decreed that they would switch calendars from the Julian Calendar to a new one. And being pope, he called the new one the Gregorian Calendar. But to make the adjustment to get back on track and to keep the days straight with the earth itself, the pope decreed in 1582 that they would skip 10 days. Most of Europe made the switch, but the English, probably because they didn't trust the pope, refused. In fact Britain and its colonies in America and Canada did not switch from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar until 1752. In that year, if you went to bed on September 2, instead of waking up on the 3rd, you woke up eleven days later on September 14th. But there were other countries who did not make the switch until the 20th Century. These were mostly countries in which the Eastern Orthodox Church was prominent and they didn't trust the Pope in Rome either. But as time went by the days added up and when Russia and Greece finally made the switch they had to skip 13 days in order to get the calendar to work out right. That's all well and good and quite confusing, but what it means is that although the countries made the switch to the Gregorian Calendar, the Orthodox Church did not and still uses the Julian Calendar. That means that today, January 7th according the Gregorian Calendar is, according to old Julian Calendar, 13

days earlier, or December 25th. Merry Christmas!

That's a long way of explaining why our brothes and sister in the Orthodox traditon celebrate Christmas today. For us, yesterday was the feast of the Epiphany. That's the day that we celebrate the visit of the wise to Bethlehem to present their gifts to the Holy Family. But I'm intrigued by the fact that the Orthodox Christmas and the western Epiphany fall on days one after the other. Is Christmas over? Is Epiphany over? Did you ever wonder what happened to the star after Epiphany? Did the star stop shining after the magi arrived in Bethlehem? Had it been shining before and they just didn't notice it? In the ancient Abbey Church on the island of Iona in Scotland is a little side stairway called the night stair. This is the stairway that the monks would use in the night when they came down for their prayers at 3 am and that they would use again to return to their beds. It is still used today for Abbey members who meet late to pray and then go up the night stairs to bed. But as they go up that stair at the turn of the stairs going up to the chapter house is a carving, a picture of the three wise men asleep in one bed. But next to the bed is an angel, complete with wings and halo. The magi are asleep but the angel is awake touching their hands and pointing urgently beyond them—warning them in a dream not to return to Herod, and to go home a different way.

What happens when they wake up? Are things different? They have completed their journey, delivered their gifts and now they are supposed to go back and tell Herod what they had found. Will they? Or has the dream taught them something different? “Epiphany means a manifestation—a discovery, a showing, bringing into the light of day, seeing plainly. In the helpless child in his mother’s arms, they saw the Messiah: a powerful moment of epiphany. And now this dream shows them something else. It is a little epiphany, a way of seeing that everything is not as it seems: that there is another level of truth, and a different way home.” (Alison Swinfen)

Epiphany means a revealing—discovering a truth. It doesn't mean it wasn't there before, it just means that we can now see it. Did the star go away? Or is it still there? Is Christmas over? Or does it go on? Christmas celebrates the coming of Christ into the world. Epiphany celebrates that the Christ has come

for all the world, including these three foreigners who have traveled to see him. And maybe as the magi go home, the star is still shining, but they don't need it anymore because they have seen the one who is the light of the world. The light we celebrate at Christmas and at Epiphany is not a new light, it was always there. We celebrate because our eyes were opened to see him. Christmas is not over because that light has not gone away. The presence of God, the light of Christ, the power of the Spirit have always been there, will always be there. But do we have our eyes opened to go back to our homes another way. Perhaps seeing instead of blind.

When the song of the angel is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost--To heal the broken--To feed the hungry--
To release the prisoner--To rebuild the nations--
To bring peace among brothers and sisters--
To make music in the heart.

That is our prayer, O God. To make this day not just one where we put away Christmas, but to make this day the first of all the days when we do the work of Christmas, led by your Holy Spirit. Let us work for peace now that we have witnessed the birth of the prince of peace, peace in our world, our church, our homes, our relationships and in each heart. And let us care for one another, especially those whom we guard and nurture, all the other children under our care, and for those who grieve because a loved one is no longer in our sight but in your care. Especially we pray for

And be with us as we work to be with them. We pray as baptized ones, children all, who have been called by your name, and who have been taught to pray together . . . Our father who art in heaven.

The light of Christmas or Epiphany is not a new light, it is a light that we finally see. It continues to shine. Did the star stop shining over Bethlehem? Or is it still there? Is it still here?