

Understanding the Church Seasons



The Season of Epiphany

The Feast of the Epiphany is observed on January 6th. It goes by other names in various church traditions. In Hispanic and Latin culture, as well as some places in Europe, it is known as “Three Kings’ Day” (Spanish: *el Dia de los Tres Reyes, la Fiesta de Reyes, or el Dia de los Reyes Magos*. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning, “showing forth, appearance, manifestation, revelation.” On January 6th we recognize the Manifestation, or revelation, of Christ to the Gentiles – the good news that Jesus revealed God to all people.

Epiphany is the climax of the Christmas Season and the Twelve Days of Christmas, which are counted from December 25th until January 5th. The day *before* Epiphany is the twelfth day of Christmas, and is sometimes called Twelfth Night, an occasion for feasting in some cultures. In some cultures, the baking of a special King's Cake is part of the festivities of Epiphany (a King's Cake is part of the observance of Mardi Gras in French Catholic culture of the Southern USA).

The Feast of the Epiphany is followed by the “**Sundays after the Epiphany**”. The length of this season of Epiphany varies from four to nine Sundays, depending on the date of Easter for that year. How can you figure this out? Open your Prayer Book to page 882. Here is a table to find Easter Day. When you find the year 2009 you’ll see that Easter will be on April 12th. Now turn to pages 884-5. Here is the table for finding moveable feasts. When you find the 2009 date of April 12th, you can scroll across and see that there will be seven Sundays after Epiphany in 2009. You can also see that Ash Wednesday (the beginning of Lent) will be February 25th; the Feast of the Ascension will be May 21st; and the Feast of Pentecost will be May 31st. If you are the Christian Formation leader in your parish, knowing these dates is important to your planning!

A piece of Episcopal trivia – the last Sunday of the Epiphany season is called “The Last Sunday after the Epiphany” not the seventh Sunday after Epiphany!

The season of Epiphany has several important **Holy Days** within it. The first Sunday after the Epiphany is The Baptism of Our Lord. See below for information on studying baptism. January 18th is The Confession of St. Peter; the 25th is the Conversion of St. Paul; and February 2nd is the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple (also known as Candlemas; *not* also known as Groundhog Day!). Some minor feast days are Martin Luther King, Jr. (martyr) on January 15th (though observed in most states on January 19th); John Chrysostom (Bishop) on the 27th; Thomas Aquinas (Priest and Friar) on the 28th; Absalom Jones (Priest) on February 13th; and Martin Luther (Reformer,) on February 18th. Information on these feast days can be found in Lesser Feasts and Fasts (Church Publishing Inc) and Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts by Sam Portaro (Cowley Publications). Both are must have books for your Christian formation library. You can also find great information at: <http://www.satucket.com/lectionary>

Candlemas (from Candle Mass), on February 2nd, takes its name from the candles carried at the celebration of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple (see the Book of Occasional Services). It celebrates a ritual of Jewish law related to first-born sons. Luke 2 (21-40) tells us how Mary and Joseph carried out this ritual, and how Anna and Simeon honored the baby Jesus as the promised Messiah.

White is the color for the Feast of the Epiphany and the days up to and including the next Sunday, which is the Baptism of our Lord. White is the festival color of the church. Green is the color for the remaining Sundays after Epiphany. Green represents the ongoing life of the church.

The best-known symbols of Epiphany are the three wise men and the star. The story of the magi is found only in Matthew (2:1-12). Magi were people who studied the movement of the stars to interpret their meaning. They were Gentiles, not Jews. The single star that the magi followed recalls the manifestation of Christ to the world.

Themes of Epiphany are: Baptism; Jesus is the light of the world who helps us to see better; Jesus came into the world for all people; and discipleship (you might consider using the "Form of Commitment to Christian Service in the Prayer Book, pages 420-1, and the commitment services in the Book of Occasional Services). The study of spiritual gifts is also very appropriate in Epiphany because of the connections between Baptism, the gifts of the Magi and discipleship. The calling of the disciples is heard on the second Sunday after the Epiphany. And in Year C (which is where we are now!) the Epistle readings will be from I Corinthians, which include the passages on spiritual gifts and the one Spirit.

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