

# DAWNING REALIZATION

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs  
Preached on the Festival of Epiphany, January 8, 2017

*In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

## **Embrace Your Own Christed Destiny**

I'm aware that Christmas Eve is not the best time to espouse hard-core theology in a sermon, although I did throw in a tablespoonful or so on Christmas Eve. I talked about Jesus being a prototype or a pioneer. The etymology of the word "prototype" means the first of what would then become typical. A pioneer is the first one along a path but with the understanding that others will eventually come along the same path.

Then I put it out there. Took a risk and said at the conclusion of my spellbinding sermon that, if you really wanted to adore the babe in the manger, if you really wanted to worship the Christ, if you really wanted to please God, then you should embrace *your own Christed destiny*.

And then I made eye contact. I don't know whether my gambit worked or not, but I put it out there. There's great scriptural support for that kind of thinking. The scriptures talk a lot about putting on the mind of Christ, conforming oneself into the image of Christ, transforming oneself into the practice and likeness of Christ. Or in layman's terms, *stop thinking so small*.

Having said that on Christmas Eve, today is the first Sunday that we recognize the relatively minor holiday of Epiphany. It was actually last Friday, the same day that Houston Smith died. It's the thirteenth day after Christmas. We tend to think of Christmas as

a day, but in the liturgical season, it's the twelve days of Christmas, hence the song.

The very next day after the season of Christmas is the day of Epiphany. The interesting etymology for this word lends understanding to what's going on or what's being recognized. The "epi" means "upon." So you get an epidermal, for example, upon the skin. And then the "phan" part of the word means "appearance" or "showing up." So you have The Phantom of the Opera, which is like a ghost that makes an appearance, and thus the word means "an appearance upon." "Showing up upon."

## **Born Jewish, Jesus Came to All Humanity**

Specifically, this may be said to refer to the gentiles. Jesus had been born among the Jews, and now with three foreigners bearing gifts — we assume there are three, but the Bible doesn't say — these magi come from a foreign land. Jesus makes his appearance finally to the gentiles, which means at this point, Jesus has come to the rich and the poor, the Jew and the gentile, the uneducated and the wise. In other words, Jesus has come to humanity in all of its breadth.

Epiphany is also associated with another story. It's the very next story after I stopped reading the Matthew passage (2:1-12), and it's not preached hardly at all for obvious reasons. It's the Slaughter of the Innocents.

King Herod had some issues. You can see by the way the story is worded that he wanted to

know when and where this baby had been born and is called King of the Jews. “Well, excuse me,” thinks Herod. “*I’m* King of the Jews, thank you very much.” He’s frightened by this and wants to know when and where for his own reasons. And so the Slaughter of the Innocents is an extremely horrible story in that he decided to have all boys between birth and two years of age killed.

### **Burial Place for Slaughter of the Innocents**

I had a chance to visit the church in Jerusalem that memorializes this event. It’s a simple building, the main part of which is underground, beneath the chapel. It’s just a chapel above, but below is a series of six or seven rooms, catacomb style. You have to scrunch down, and it’s all just rock walls. You go into an area with little tunnels that go off toward the different rooms.

The main room has slots the size of a bathtub, carved sideways into the wall. The tradition is that these are where they laid the dead babies. In the center of this room in the basement of the church is a simple table with a white linen cloth and one candle, simply to memorialize the event recounted in the gospels.

In all honesty, I must tell you that this event is *not* corroborated in other historical sources, so it lends doubt as to whether or not it actually happened. That’s on one side of the story. The other side is that Herod did kill three of his sons, his mother-in-law, and the second of his ten wives. So the third son that he killed was actually his first-born, the one who would have succeeded him, and it was on his deathbed that Herod ordered the beheading of his eldest son. I wouldn’t put it past this guy, who might well have done something this horrible. Okay, that’s the context.

### **Three Gifts of Magi Viewed as Symbolic**

What I’d like to look at this morning is those three gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There have been criticisms for two millennia about these gifts because they aren’t practical. There are no Pampers, no Handi-Wipes, no little plastic toys that you can drape across the crib. Seriously, where did they come up with these gifts? For two millennia, they have been viewed as symbolic, with one exception.

Let me read you this quote from Saint Bernard. Think Middle Ages, a millennium ago, when he wrote:

“For the offer to Mary, the mother of the child, gold for to relieve her poverty, incense against the stench of the stable and evil air, myrrh for to comfort the tender members of the child and to put away vermin.”

The gifts were thought to be extremely practical. Got rid of poverty, stench, and vermin, all this according to Saint Bernard. But of course, the vast majority of people have viewed these gifts as symbolic.

Frankincense is symbolic of the priesthood, used by the priests regularly. Gold, symbolic of royalty. You’ve been invited to visit the king from a far country, what gift do you bring? You bring gold, pure and simple, a common practice. Myrrh is the odd one, and the tradition has it that myrrh was used for embalming. This is an extremely odd gift to give a little baby. The symbolism of it is that it prefigures Jesus’ death. He was to die, as we all know.

What I would like to do this morning, though, is to flip this over, turn it on its head, and put these three gifts alongside that initial sentence I said on Christmas Eve: “Embrace

*your* own Christed destiny” with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Let me explain:

### **Frankincense, Symbolic of the Priesthood**

I would ask you now to entertain the notion of *your* priesthood. What does a priest do, anyway? Not much, we know that. A priest stands between a human being and God and eases the way between the two.

Now in my personal theology, I find this completely unnecessary. I believe that every human being is infused with divinity, that there's no place we can go to escape divinity. It is around us and within us.

The notion of having over here a God who's at least mildly ticked off, maybe downright angry, and a miserable sinning human being over there, and the two can't get along at all. This doesn't work within my own theology. I don't think along those ways at all.

However, there are lots of people who *think* that God is distant and apathetic or angry. I bet you wouldn't have to think very hard to come across such a person in your mind, and *you* can play the role of a priest for such people. You can be the one to stand between the person and his or her image of God that may or may not be anywhere close to the truth, and you can help people come together with God.

There are people with tremendous needs for healing, for comfort, for guidance in their lives, and they don't feel that God cares enough to offer it to them. That is the role of the priest. *You* in your role in the world.

### **Myrrh, Symbolic of Sacrifice unto Death**

I would guess that every single one of us has some facet of our life, some facet of our character that is clenched tight, and we are unwilling to open it up and offer it to the world. We don't need to sacrifice ourselves unto death,

but is there something that we can give of ourselves, particularly for the good of the world? A kind word? A skill that we have? Perhaps money? Perhaps something that is of ourselves? Is there something that we can do sacrificially to make the world a better place?

That is what myrrh symbolizes. Jesus came and sacrificed unto death. What is there in our conformity into the image of Christ and the transformation of our mind? Is there something we can do to open ourselves, our minds and our hearts, more and more for releasing balm into a hurting world? The answer is yes. I can't tell you what it is, but you know what it is in your own heart and mind.

This can be *your* role in the priesthood, *your* role in opening your heart and mind for the good of the world. Now the third one is the hard one. The other two are child's play relative to the third one.

### **Gold, Symbolic of Royalty**

One thing I've learned over my thirty-some years as a minister is that people generally do not consider themselves primarily as children of God. We think of ourselves pretty much as sort of a body, about thirty pounds overweight, and that's who I am. That's Art Suggs. Sixty some years old, overweight, knees hurting a little. That's who I am.

But that's *not* me. I am a *soul* that has incarnated into a body. Same thing for you. If God is spirit, so are you. That is your primary identity. If God is king, you are a prince and a princess, and Jesus is your brother. Do you think of yourself that way at all? It makes you stand tall. You are nobility. It's a way of carrying yourself in the world, and then it affects what you say and what you do for the rest of your days, based upon your *correct*

self-image. I have spent my career trying to correct that self-image, and I'm not going to stop now. That is who *you* are.

My suggestion to you on this Epiphany is to entertain these three thoughts:

- **What is your priestly role in the world?**
- **What is it that you can open up and give to make the world more-peaceful, healthier, and a more-just place?**
- **Remember who you are.**

*Amen.*