

Sermon for
THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD
Memorial Mass for Fr. Jude Donald Motaka

Fr. John R. Cochran, Prior
Church of the Visitation, January 6, 2021

Matthew 2:1-12: “By the Leading of a Star”

The feast of the Epiphany is all about wise men and a bright star and journeys following the star. It has been told and re-told countless times, enacted and re-enacted countless times, has its own music and all the elements of high drama. In every parish I have served the coming of the wise men has been dramatized, sometimes very convincingly and sometimes with amateurish awkwardness. In the tabernacle at Trinity Church in Pittsburgh were the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, together with bread and oils. The story yields itself to easy understanding – you know even as a youth who are the good guys and who are the bad guys – but keeps on drawing us in to its truths with nuance and insight as long as we can still read it and hear it.

The wise men are astrologers, students of the stars and the signs, from Mesopotamia, known as Magi. The journey is set in motion by the extraordinary appearance of a very bright star in the heavens, which they interpreted as a sign of a king born in Israel. They went first to the present king in Jerusalem, Herod, thinking he would help them find the newborn king. Ha! They didn't know the character of this king, who would destroy anyone or anything that threatened his rule. But they went on following the star to the house, to the parents, to the child, “and they knelt down and paid him homage.” Nowhere does scripture say there were three, but that tidbit is extrapolated from the three gifts they offered. They sought the Christ, the promised one, the fulfillment of prophecies and the hope of the future of humankind.

As we rehearse the story of the wise men today we also remember another wise man from the east, Fr. Jude, Donald Eugene Motaka. Now there's another story, deeply nuanced, a long quest, a journey like few others. Born and reared in the historic town of Gettysburg, PA, son of Almena Motaka, he was an extraordinary child, mischievous, exceedingly bright, impatient with delay and

always outspoken. He was profoundly influenced by his church, St. James Lutheran Church, in Gettysburg and by the team of pastors serving there, Fritz Foltz and Ed Keyser. They spied the giftedness of this child and made sure he had educational opportunities commensurate with his abilities at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut. Called to ministry he served two parishes, the first in Aaronsburg, PA (near State College), and Tabernacle Church in Philadelphia. But his journey led him away from ministry, into politics and then as an internet technician, an IT, in Washington and Maryland. Many of his tastes and passions were formed in these early years and persisted to the end. The arrival of this wise man here was not by camel, but by a U-Haul with most of his belongings in 2013. He was following the star again, seeking to find and worship the Christ of God. Most people settle into a stable pattern which carries them through their adult life into golden years, so-called. But Fr. Jude's adult years are marked by wide swings and varying patterns. He will be remembered for his sharp sense of humor, his boisterous laughter, his keen intelligence and his abiding faith in the object of the journey, Jesus Christ. Folks would look forward to his preaching which was often laced with humor and reflected his journey seeking the Christ of God. His interest in fine woodworking led him to look for a place for his tools . . . and the garage was history. It became his workshop and out came pieces of such quality that they were admired by all. His fingerprints are all around us and will speak to us for many years that another carpenter was among us. You all have your own memories of him. Treasure them and share them, remembering that he was still following a star, still on his journey to the Christ of God. The end of his earthly life came unexpectedly on December 21 at the age of 68. The dangers of COVID transmission (he did not have COVID) meant we could not visit him. He died alone in the hospital. But a Christian never dies alone, no matter the place or the cause. Jesus, who walked the valley of the shadow of death and died on a cross, stands beside Fr. Jude, takes him by the hand and leads him through the valley into eternal life. The Wisdom of Solomon states it this way (3:1-4): "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality."

Rest eternal grant him, O Lord: And let light perpetual shine upon him.