

4 January 2026
The Epiphany of Our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A God Who Loves Camels”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Merry Christmas! For today is the eleventh day of Christmas, of the Christmas season, even though we're remembering and observing Epiphany today. So we can still say Merry Christmas.

But we're observing Epiphany today, and since we are, let me ask: *What's your favorite part of the Epiphany story?*

For many, I think, it would be the star. The star God sent to lead the Wise Men to the child Jesus. That's a pretty cool part of the story.

For others, it would probably be the Wise Men themselves. Those mysterious visitors from the East. Mysterious, for we really don't know who they were. We call them Wise Men. The Greek calls them Magi. A beloved carol calls them kings. We don't know how many there were or where exactly they came from. And they disappear from the scene as quickly as they came. But the mystery is part of the attraction, I think. And the popular phrase "*Wise Men still seek Him*" make many want to imagine themselves as and imitate the Wise Men.

But as for me, I have a new favorite part of the Epiphany story this year - one that I don't think anyone wants to be, but I think really captures the spirit of Epiphany more than the star or the Wise Men . . . and that is **the camels**.

Wait! What? *Camels?*

Yup. The camels. They're mentioned in the Old Testament reading we heard from the prophet Isaiah today:

***A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,***

and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.

Would we have the Epiphany story *without* the camels? According to Isaiah, they brought the Wise Men, the treasures, the good news, and the praises. These beasts of burden are an important part of the story.

But have you ever *seen* a camel? I mean, *they're ugly!* They're not cute and cuddly like cats and dogs. They're not majestic - they walk and move very awkwardly. They have those giant humps, either one or two of them. Their heads are too small for their bodies. They grunt funny. They're temperamental and stubborn. And they'll spit on you! Really gross saliva. God made a lot of unusual creatures, and He loves them all . . . *but camels?* Well, bear with me . . .

Because camels, I think, are the perfect image of Epiphany . . . in this way: Epiphany is the revealing of this child, Jesus, as God in the flesh, come to save *camels*. Not camels the animals - but *people* who are like camels. People who are not the most beautiful, people disfigured by sin, humpy, lumpy, misproportioned, stubborn, ugly . . . but who God loves and sent His Son to die for. And the Bible is full of them! Full of "human camels."

There was Paul. He considered himself a camel. He called himself untimely born (1 Corinthians 15:8), the least of all the saints (Ephesians 3:8), he was weak and sickly, maybe with bad eyesight (Galatians 4:13, 15), and often in prison! Yet God shone the light of His grace upon Paul and used him as a light to the Gentiles.

And speaking of Gentiles . . . they were considered camels by Israel, who really didn't want them and their false worship and strange customs around.

Gentiles like the Wise Men, who may have been camels themselves. In our day, Wise Men are often eccentric or consider weird. Maybe the ones who came to see Jesus were, too, and mocked and taunted for following a star, wasting their money on a foreign king, falling on their knees before a child . . .

A child who Himself was considered a camel by many. Yes, Jesus Himself was taunted as an illegitimate child (John 8:41), and as being out of His mind (Mark 3:21). Isaiah tells us that He had nothing majestic or beautiful about His appearance (Isaiah 53:2). And then especially after He was flogged and crucified - people just wanted to look away. He didn't spit, but was spit upon. He didn't have a hump on His back, but carried a cross there.

Which then brings us to you. Maybe you consider yourself a camel. Maybe we are a congregation of camels! People a bit awkward, not the most beautiful. Misfits.

Flawed. Not strong, wise, and outstanding, compared to others. A little quirky, maybe even odd. Not beautiful to the world, but like real camels, beautiful to God. And *made* beautiful by God. Washed cleaned and re-created in the waters of Baptism to be His beautiful, radiant Bride. Maybe you are someone no one else would choose, *but God did*. And He shined the light of His love upon you. Camels who bring treasures also: your children, your families, your praises.

And there are lots of camels out there. People ugly inside and out. People the world doesn't want and has no use for. *But God does*. And Epiphany is God rolling out the welcome mat for them, for us. For *all* to come and see Him in the flesh - the Body and Blood He would sacrifice and lay down for the life of the world. To shine the light of His love upon a dark and loveless world. *A God who loves camels*.

And that's really what Epiphany is all about, what Jesus is all about: making the goodness and love of God known. The goodness and love of God in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Sometimes that happens in an unusual, even spectacular way, like with the Wise Men and the star. Is stuff like that still happening today? I don't know. Maybe. There are reports from Iran and other countries of people coming to faith in Jesus because of dreams they've had. And we know that Jesus wants all people to be saved, so *maybe*. And if so, that's a cause for joy.

But even if He is, even if God is using unusual ways today, to bring his Son to people and people to His Son, don't despise the regular, normal, ordinary ways He has given us - which are far more common than the unusual or extraordinary. A friend talking to a friend. A mother teaching her child to pray. A father bringing his family to church. Being there at crisis moments, or times of fear and uncertainty, to bring the grace and love and peace of God to people who feel like camels. And maybe they are. *But we have a God who loves camels*.

And so He sent the apostle Paul, and He establishes churches today, to shine the light of this truth. To be a star and lead others to Jesus. To be a point of stability and truth in a world where things are constantly changing and truth is relative. To proclaim an unchanging God and His unfailing love. As I said, Epiphany is God rolling out the welcome mat for all the world, for He wants all people - and maybe especially camels! - in His kingdom.

But while God loves camels, He doesn't want us to stay camels! No. God came in the flesh, so that the sin which deforms us would go. And so He washes us clean and raises us to a new life in Baptism. He absolves our sin, not for us to get away with it, but to get us out of it and to get it out of us! And then He Suppers us with His own Body and Blood - the food of immortality. All this to make us sons and daughters of God. Maybe camels, still, in the eyes of the world, and crazy ones at that! But not in

the eyes of God. In His eyes, children, dearly loved, with a place in His heart and a place in His kingdom.

And maybe because of this, the world will *roll up* its welcome mat and not welcome you into its groups of the privileged and the esteemed, the loved and admired. And maybe they will do worse, using that rolled up welcome mat as a club to persecute you. Jesus said if they did it to Him, they'll do it to us. As we heard last week, Herod did it, rolling up the mat he rolled out for the Wise Men to club the baby boys of Bethlehem. The goodness and love of God isn't coming from the world - only from the child in the manger, on Mary's lap, and finally on the cross.

Did the Wise Men live long enough to hear that news? That the child before whom they fell down and worshiped and to whom they gave their gifts, the King of the Jews, had been crucified by the Romans? We don't know. As I said, these Wise Men disappear from the scene as quickly as they came onto it.

But we know. We know that this child whose little fingers could barely wrap around the grown-up fingers of the Wise Men, would one day use those fingers to touch and heal eyes that were blind, ears that were deaf, bodies that were leprous, raise the dead, and finally be nailed to a cross. That was Paul's message to the Gentiles and it is the church's message to the world: that the goodness and love of God was shown in the birth of this child who is the Son of God, but even more was shown in the death and resurrection of this man, that every man, woman, and child who dies might rise to eternal life in Him. He died for all and welcomed all, *especially camels*. And still does.

Which is why I'm glad Isaiah included them in his prophecy. I'm glad they weren't left out of the story. They're my new favorite part of the Epiphany story, for they give me hope. And I hope they give you hope, too. That I don't have to make myself something for God - I don't have to un-camel myself for Him - because God made Himself nothing for me, to un-camel me. To make me - and you - His son, His daughter. To open my eyes to see His love. To open me ears to hear His Word. To cleanse my body so diseased with sin. And finally, one day, raise me to life eternal.

So this morning, if you want to be like the Wise Men, follow the light of His Word and come to the altar. For here is the Body and Blood born of Mary, worshiped by Wise Men, hung on the cross, raised from the dead, and **now given to you**. Come with your humps and lumps, your burdens and baggage, come awkward and downtrodden. For God loves camels. God loves you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

The idea of using the example of camels in this way from Rev. Nathan Jastram in “The Singing Camels of Sheba,” *Concordia Pulpit Resources*, Vol. 36, Part 1 (CPH, 2026), 65-66.