We are nearing the day of Epiphany, which is the day when the church has historically celebrated the Magi bringing gifts to the Christ Child. But the festival is bigger than that.

When I look up the word “epiphany” in the Online Etymology Dictionary, I learn that the word itself, which is from the early 14th century, literally means the “festival of the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.” So Pentecost could be considered an epiphany, as could any experience of baptism, or any time we gather for worship, or any time we remember Christ among us! But I digress…

The word can be traced through old French through Latin to the late Greek *epiphainein*, which means “to manifest, display, or show off; to come suddenly into view.”

When you trace the word back to its etymological roots, which the good folks at the Online Etymological Dictionary have done for us, its root is the Proto-Ind-European root *bha-*, which means “to shine.” This is the source of a Sanskrit word meaning “shines/glitters,” the Greek word we’ve already discussed, another Greek word meaning “makes visible/displays,” and an old Irish word meaning “white/light/ray of light.”

This morning, as I was reading the entry in the OED\* for Epiphany and *bha-*, which appear one right after the other on the website, I was reminded of a couple of lines of verse from JRR Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” trilogy:

*“All that is gold does not glitter;*

*Not all those who wander are lost…”*

If you’re familiar with Tolkien’s work, you may recall that these lines are part of a longer poem that refer to Aragorn son of Arathorn, the head of the Rangers and one of the Nine who set out towards Mordor in hopes of overthrowing Sauron by destroying the One Ring. Whether you’re familiar with Tolkien’s work or not, you may have read this second line on bumper stickers, t-shirts, etc. before. And while it’s a cool line, you may be wondering: what does it have to do with Epiphany?

In my mind, a lot. The Magi were most likely astrologers and Zoroastrians from Persia, accompanying a trading caravan. They were on a long journey, travelers from afar, who we believe followed the star to where Jesus was, seeking whatever miracle lay underneath it. And what they found was certainly not what they expected! They expected to find a prince, the heir to a kingdom, and instead, they found the child of laborers.

This is true of us, as well. We know what path we are on. We are following the path that Jesus has set before us. Sometimes, we feel like we can see clearly where the path is leading us, for miles and miles ahead, years into our future. And sometimes, we feel like the path is only illuminated one step at a time. But we trust to Jesus to guide us, and we know that he accompanies us on the path. And we know that the treasure we seek is not one that glitters; it’s not the riches of the world. It’s not even the gold, frankincense and myrrh that the Magi brought to the Christ child. It’s the true and certain promise of our salvation and the everlasting peace that Christ brings to us.

\*Online Etymology Dictionary, not Oxford English Dictionary, naturally!