Today, we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord—of the “We Three Kings of Orient Are” Christmas Ame hymn. But, if you read the account in St. Matthew’s Gospel (chapter 2), you’ll discover that they were not described as kings but simply “wise men,” or “magi,” from the Greek magoi. They probably got the “king” designation due to the pricey gifts they brought—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—to honor the “newborn king of the Jews,” whom they sought. But apparently, before the magi came, St. Luke records (Luke 2:8-20) that an angel host appeared to the Jewish shepherds in the field the very night of Jesus’ birth to announce the arrival of the Savior Messiah. This event has long been seen as pointing to God’s love for the poor, the humble, and the lowly, for shepherds were some of the poorest and lowest of the land in the day. It was 24/7 in the fields, 365 days a year … cold, heat, rain, dust, wind … no matter. And all for hardly more than something to eat and little more shelter than their cloaks. Yet to them do the angels bring their message.

Much is made of the guiding star and the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh—precious expensive gifts which do fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah (“… the wealth of nations shall be brought to you … bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD.” (Isaiah 60:5-6)), foreshadowing Jesus as priest (frankincense), prophet and king (gold), with myrrh foreshadowing His redeeming death, for myrrh was used in funeral rites.

But the main point of the Epiphany is that these non-Jewish (Gentile) magi come to the newborn child, themselves unknowingly representing all non-Jewish peoples. For Jesus is not only king and savior of the Jews, but of the whole world … to all seeking the truth that comes only from God, and all such faithful seekers of truth become God’s new Chosen People. As St. Paul writes: “…the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.” (Ephesians 3:2-3, 6) And Peter writes in his first letter to all the faithful: “…you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people....” (1 Peter 2:9-10)

This explicit inclusion of the non-Jewish peoples does not mean rejection of the Jews by any means; in fact, Christians believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Jewish faith and hope. Accordingly, St. Paul writes of such in Romans 11, the essential kernel being: “…if you [non-Jews] have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree [a people not of God], and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree [a Chosen People], how much more will these natural branches [Jews] be grafted back into their own olive tree [the Chosen of God]…they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.” (Romans 11:24, 28-29)

Hmmm … “…beloved for the sake of their forefathers”—something that Christians who find themselves opposed to Jews, especially in these days of the Gaza conflict, should consider. There may be “good and bad” Jews, but we certainly know both “good and bad” Christians, too. The Jews are, as many popes have called them, our “elder brothers in faith,” and our Christian faith is very much a type of Messianic Judaism—a fulfillment of the prophecies of Israel.
Thus, we do not discard Jewish scriptures and law that were before Christ, but rather the Gospels and New Testament build upon and complete them. Jesus Himself affirms: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.” (Matthew 5:17)

But all peoples are called to come to God’s love and to Jesus, who is truth and the eternal God. And we Christians can, and should, try to lead others to Him because He is eternal truth and life, and to truly love our neighbor is to pursue that realization in them. So, like the good gardener, we sow the seed and cultivate as best we can ... but, in the end, it is God who gives the growth, by watering the seed with His grace. But seed unplanted does not sprout.

This does not mean we don’t warn in charity those who are doing things objectively against the teaching of God, and things which are wrong and perhaps even evil; that would be more cowardice than kindness, and thus contributing to the danger to others’ eternal salvation. Yet always correcting and teaching with tact and charity, not breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoldering wick.

So, we Christians hold that God is Father, and Jesus is Savior ... not just of Jews, but of all people, represented by the wise men just as the Jews had been represented by the Jewish shepherds who adored the infant Jesus. After all, the name “Jesus” means “God saves” or “God is salvation,” yet not only for one nation, but for all the world’s peoples who seek Him ... who seek Truth.

King Herod, the Jewish but Roman puppet king of the Epiphany story, had the fundamental but not uncommon fault of unbridled worldly ambition, and thus tried to destroy the true Good, as such ambition often does. But, as Jesus warns us, we cannot love both God and mammon. (cf. Matthew 6:24) Similarly, we at Ames have to choose between Herod’s palace at Jerusalem and the stable of Bethlehem. But we know which wise men chose.

Pope Francis has remarked that the magi represent all who sincerely seek truth ... who seek God ... and are willing to make the often long, arduous journey to find Him. And thus wise men and women choose the stable even today ... for Herod and his palace are but dust and ashes. But that little babe, lying in a manger, is God whom the universe itself cannot contain—the Creator of the Heavens and earth, who gives eternal life to those who sincerely seek Him.