

Epiphany Sermon: *Home by Another Route* January 8, 2017

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him." When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come One who governs, who will shepherd My people Israel.*"

Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route. Matthew 2:1-12

When the children and youth were practicing the Christmas pageant, Gavin Gunn was cast as Herod, and he read the lines - Herod's words - with little enthusiasm. But when I told Gavin that Herod was evil and duplicitous (I might have said he was a phony) and he should act as Herod did... Gavin made the role his own. His voice dripped with wickedness and everyone hearing him knew that Herod had no desire to worship the Baby Jesus, and every intention of destroying the newborn King. Gavin made

Herod “come alive” and when scripture comes alive in someone, God is revealed.

Today we celebrate Epiphany when Jesus was revealed through the magi, the star, and gifts given to the Christ-Child. Epiphany means “to reveal or to make known.” The Church has observed Epiphany since the 4th century, and Orthodox and Eastern Christians celebrate Epiphany instead of Christmas, because on that day Christ is revealed as a gift to all the world.

This is a full bulletin and there’s not much room to write, but on the insert, right below the Sunday Financial Counters, there’s a little space. There are four lessons from Epiphany, and I hope you’ll write them down, because they’re meant as gifts for us. The first gift is from the magi: “Don’t travel alone.” Let’s say it together: “Don’t travel alone.” The magi were astrologers who read the stars, and conferred with each other as to their meaning. There was one star, the brightest ever seen, and they determined together that they were meant to follow where it led. On their travels they came upon Herod, and then discerned together, and heard in a dream (apparently together), that Herod was not to be trusted, and so they traveled back to their own country by another route.

I joined in a Christian commune while I was in college, and it was not a good fit. It was controlling and restrictive and I grew anxious when it felt like the rules were closing in on me. I finally met with the leader of the commune and told him that it was not a good fit for me, and I needed to leave. I couldn't hear much of our conversation because of my heart was pounding so loudly, because I was afraid. But I did hear the last words of the leader. He said, "Marylee, find a church. Because a Christian on her own is like a coal taken out of the fire. It grows cold and dies." As time went by I began to see his words as a gift, and a blessing. We are not meant to follow Jesus alone. We are meant, like the magi, to consult together, to discern together, to dream together... we are meant to travel together.

It is more common in our culture to be defined as "spiritual" rather than as a follower of Jesus. Little is required if you are "spiritual but not religious." But to be a person of faith requires that we practice our faith rather than simply have an intellectual belief (because as scripture tells us, "Even demons believe in God.") [James 2:19] To be a Christian is travel together: to be part of a faith community, to learn from each other, to be loved, and accepted, and uncomfortably tumbled in the rock-tumbler that is Church, until our rough edges are smoothed and polished and we reflect the light of Christ. This polishing and refining process happens best in a

small group where we can be known, and can be “watched over in love” to quote Methodism’s founder, John Wesley. In this New Year I urge you to join or start a small group (even two or three people can be a small group) to travel together, to follow Jesus... together. The magi traveled, and found Jesus, together. We learn the first gift of Epiphany from them: “Don’t travel alone.” Say it with me: **Don’t travel alone.**

The second gift is also from the magi: “Be confident of your gift.” Let’s say it together: “Be confident of your gift.” The magi brought precious gifts to the Baby Jesus that revealed who He was... gold, a valuable gift of great worth, to symbolize Jesus’ kingship; frankincense, a perfume used in prayer and worship, to symbolize His sacredness and divinity; and myrrh, an embalming oil, to symbolize His sacrificial death. The magi, we are told, followed the star until it stopped, and they were overwhelmed with joy. They bowed before Jesus, and offered Him their most precious gifts.

We all come from God who has, scripture tells us, made us in God’s own image. We are imprinted with the Creator’s own divine fingerprints, and God has given us gifts that bless us, and bless others, and reveal who God is. Take a moment to think about your God-gifts. What do people say about you; what do they appreciate about you? [pause] And what do you appreciate and value about yourself? [pause] What do you do, and what is

about you, that blesses other people? *[pause]* These are God-gifts, given to you for your joy and satisfaction, and to bless and help others, and to reveal Jesus. Take a moment, and write down one or two gifts that God has given you that bring you joy, that you're grateful for, that you use to bless other people. *[pause]* Now today covenant, that is, make a sacred promise with God, that in this New Year you will travel with others, and learn how to polish and refine your God-gifts for the blessing and healing of the world.

Be like the magi, and offer yourself, and your best gifts to Jesus. They brought gifts to Jesus that revealed who He was. When we use our gifts to teach, to heal, to feed, to clothe, to support, to bless, to delight others... we reveal who Jesus is to the world. From the magi we receive the second gift of Epiphany: "Be confident of your gift." Say it with me: **Be confident of your gift.**

The third gift is something we observe about the magi. They were foreigners, strangers, outsiders, and to the Jews, heathen. They were astrologers, who consulted the stars and believed in the occult, in supernatural powers. They were kind of new-agers. And they were the first to reveal who Jesus was. So the third gift of Epiphany is: "Look for Jesus everywhere." Let's say it together: "Look for Jesus everywhere."

When we look for Jesus, for what reveals Him to the world, what do we look for? Love... joy... peace... patience... kindness... goodness... gentleness... faithfulness... and self-discipline. The Apostle Paul has given us these signs of God's presence in us, and in the world. So we are to look for these signs that reveal Jesus... everywhere, even in unlikely places. One place to start looking for Jesus is in a relationship with someone who isn't a Christian... perhaps a person of another faith, like Jewish or Muslim or Sikh. Living in the Bay Area makes it pretty easy to find people of diverse faiths, but meeting someone and forming a relationship might take some real effort on your part. Jesus came as the Savior of all the world, which was revealed by the magi... outsiders, foreigners, heathen. What can you learn from someone of another faith... where can you see Jesus... what is revealed to you about Him?

Another place to look for Jesus everywhere... is where Mother Teresa said we find Him "in His most distressing disguise" ~ that is, in the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the immigrant, the lonely, the helpless, the powerless. We're trained to give and help and minister to those in need... but what can we learn from them about Jesus, and how is He revealed in them?

Let's look for our enemies (people we don't like; foreign countries and leaders; family members we wish were related to someone other than ourselves.) What do enemies reveal to us about Jesus? This is a hard one to wrap our heads around, but psychologists tell us that our enemies may reveal something that we don't like about ourselves... enemies can hold up an uncomfortable mirror to us. Jesus said that we are to find ways to love our enemies, and to pray for them. What do we learn about Jesus (what is revealed about Him) from our enemies?

Finally to look for Jesus everywhere means that we have to look at our own behavior. Does how we live in the world reveal Jesus? This is an on-going exercise, one that we'll never perfect, and one that we learn and practice most effectively with others, in community... that the way we live reflects and reveals Jesus. We learn from the magi - outsiders, and foreigners - that God shows up everywhere. The magi were the first to reveal Jesus' divinity, and to show us that Jesus is the Savior of all the world. The third gift of Epiphany is: "Look for Jesus... everywhere." Say it with me: "**Look for Jesus everywhere.**"

Here's the fourth gift of Epiphany, given to us by a star. The star is mentioned four times in these twelve lines of scripture. The star led the magi to Jesus by shining so brightly and persistently they were able to

chart their course by it. They found Jesus by following the star... which did nothing except what it was designed to do... shine, shine brilliantly and relentlessly. The fourth gift of Epiphany is from the star: We are to “Be the star that reveals Jesus.” Say it with me: “Be the star that reveals Jesus.”

To many of us it's a new and difficult concept that we are - all of us who follow Jesus - meant to be a star that reveals Him. We are Protestants: modest people, not given to showing off, or outward demonstrations of holiness. But Jesus is revealed in us, and through us. We are His hands, His feet, His voice, His heart. No single one of us reveals all of Jesus, but we are prisms that reflect and reveal His radical and inclusive love, His compassion and solidarity with the poor, and His desire that we choose life and blessings over death and destruction. The star revealed Jesus by simply being itself, by doing what it was created to do. We were created to “love the Lord our God with all our passion and prayer and intelligence,” and to “love others as well as we love ourselves.” We reveal Jesus to the world when we are our true selves, our made-in-God's-image-selves, doing what we were created to do. The final gift of Epiphany is: “Be the star that reveals Jesus.” Say it with me: **“Be the star that reveals Jesus.”**

When the magi saw the star had stopped over the place where Jesus was, they were filled with joy! They knelt and worshipped Him, and gave

Him their best gifts. And warned in a dream to avoid Herod, they went home by another route. When we meet Jesus, and experience the joy, and peace, and love He gives to us ~ we are never the same. We are changed... and we need to live differently... we need to travel by another route. This is the invitation of the magi, and of Epiphany, that we will seek and search for Jesus, that we will let Him into our hearts and lives, and that we live a new way... travel by another route. Let us pray...