

Sermon Epiphany Sunday January 7, 2018

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

Prayer of Confession

As the New Year begins let us ask for God's forgiveness for the times when we have chosen badly, opting for the easy of habit and social convention, rather than the higher and harder ways of Jesus. Let us confess that sometimes our choices have been made from rank selfishness, with scant concern for those around us, even for those who love us dearly. Let us ask forgiveness for putting off decisions, for dithering and avoiding choice until opportunity has gone by. Let us confess that we have at times made outwardly good decisions for the wrong reasons, driven by selfish motives.

Everyone: Lord God:

In the blazing light of Your love

Our failings are illuminated

Our failure to give

Our failure to love

Our failure to follow

Our failure to serve

Our failure to be the people

You would have us be.

Forgive us and renew us.

You know our frailty

You know our failings.

**Enfold us in Your arms
That we might daily know
Your forgiveness and healing love.
We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Silent Prayer

Assurance of Forgiveness

Out of love for the world, God chose to share our humanity in the person of Jesus Christ, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. The good news therefore is this: in Jesus Christ we are accepted, we are loved, we are forgiven. The sins and regrets of the old year are over and gone... we let them go, and in Christ we receive new life.

Everyone: Thanks be to God! Amen!

Today we celebrate this new year and all it might reveal to us. Today we also celebrate Epiphany, which is a word that means appearance, or sudden insight, or revelation. The early church observed Epiphany for a century before it began to observe Christmas as the important feast day of this season. Epiphany celebrates the early revelations of Christ: to the magi who followed the star that led to Him; and His baptism in the Jordan River, and His first miracle at the wedding at Cana. In these events God appeared, God was revealed, in the person of Jesus Christ. Christmas is the celebration the incarnation, the coming of Christ, and Epiphany is the celebration of His manifestation: how He is revealed to the world.

Christmas has been put away, although it'll be sometime before we all get the pine needles in our carpets get vacuumed up, and Valentine's candy has appeared on the shelves at CVS. But the season of Christmas lingers here, and today we celebrate Epiphany, because the mystery of incarnation and revelation aren't over.

Today we focus on the travelers who have followed a star, hoping to find and worship a newborn King. The Christian life is often described as a journey. Today we travel with the magi, who were heathen astrologers who studied and practiced astrology

and magic. We don't know the gender or the number of the magi... legend has made them three kings called Caspar, Melchior [Mel-queer] and Balthazar ... but the gospel tells us just that they were magi... star-gazers, magicians - their title, magi, comes from the word magic.

Some important things about God are revealed to us in their story, and if we don't pay attention we could miss them... we could miss the revelation of God.

The magi traveled off-road and they invite us to go with them. They invite us to leave our cars in a parking garage in Jerusalem and climb up on camels and ride to a backwater town called Bethlehem. As we ride on camelback we might discover, with Herod, the high priests, and the scribes (the people in Jerusalem who, Matthew tells us, were troubled by the magi's search for a new king) we might discover some surprising and unsettling things about God. Instead of a pew or a Choir chair, imagine now that you're on a camel leaving Jerusalem, that place of power. The king's palace is there, and all of his wealth, his military forces, his religious advisors, and his royal court. Interestingly (you may have noticed) that the priests and scribes know the prophecy the magi have asked them about, but they're uninterested. They were troubled by the question, "Where is the newborn King of the Jews?" but not troubled enough to check it out for themselves. These religious people know God too well to be surprised by God, because for generations their work has been to teach the people how to read the signs of God. And since Herod and the "real" wise men, the religious teachers and leaders, were all in Jerusalem what could interest them in a little town on the margins, like Bethlehem?

One of the lessons we learn with the magi is to watch for unexpected signs... to be open to the things of the Spirit. The priests and scribes (who were the legal experts of the Law of Moses) looked for signs in all the right places... places of correct behavior and belief... and the Epiphany, the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ, passed them by. Let us be like the magi, be open to the surprises of the Spirit. Don't however, be carried down a spiritually-dead-end road; stop and ask for directions like the magi did. Christianity, which is the practice of following Jesus with the intention of being like Jesus, is a group-activity. We learn together, we serve and pray together, we believe together and sometimes for each other. Watching Joel Olsteen from your Lazy-Boy isn't traveling with Jesus. Traveling with Jesus requires the community - being part of the Body of Christ - loving each other, forgiving each other, building each other up, polishing the rough edges off our egos, recognizing and celebrating each other's spiritual gifts, worshipping God together, and asking for directions because none of us can travel this road alone.

I haven't ridden on a camel but I've ridden on an elephant and it was what I imagine riding on the roof of a house to be like. I prayed and concentrated on staying on top of the elephant. On this Epiphany Sunday we're traveling on rough backroads to a backwater town called Bethlehem. No one in Jerusalem was interested in traveling with us.... but we're going anyway because we want to see the Messiah, the Savior. He wasn't in Jerusalem where you'd expect to find a king... He's going to be found in the margins. Another lesson we can learn with the magi is not to be too certain that we know where God is and what God is doing.

On Christmas Eve we heard that the good news of the Messiah's birth (this newborn King the magi are searching for) was first revealed to shepherds, who were (like the magi) outsiders, heathen, and who (unlike the magi who had money and traveled with generous gifts for this Baby-King) the shepherds were poor, dirty, unclean, and unwelcome. Not too far away from Herod's kingdom in Jerusalem is a small town (26 minutes if we were driving but I understand that on a camel it takes quite a bit longer) where a different kind of King is. His court is illiterate fishermen, His rule is love and peace, He has no military presence, and His example is service and sacrifice. He welcomes everyone and has a special place in His heart for outsiders, children, sinners, and the unwanted. So something else we can learn with the magi is not to look for God in the usual places. We are to look for God at the margins.

The magi have brought gifts for this Baby-King, precious gifts... I'm guessing the best they had. Christian interpretation is that the gifts were prophetic: gold for a king, frankincense for a deity, and myrrh for embalming the dead. But the most important gift they've brought is the gift He most wants from us: "They were filled with joy, and they knelt and worshipped Him." The magi brought Jesus their best and most precious gifts. Christina Rossetti, the 19th century poet, wrote, "What can I bring Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give Him... give my heart." Her poem is on page 221 in the United Methodist Hymnal, called "In the Bleak Midwinter." Rossetti wrote about the longing of every follower of Jesus Christ... and the gift we can bring Him to show our love. The best and most special gift we have to give Jesus is our hearts... and by giving Him our hearts we are changed.

It was revealed in a dream to the magi that they were to go back to their home country by another way, that the fearful and paranoid King Herod who would unleash his fire and fury on all baby boys under two years, murdering all of them in his kingdom lest one of them turn out to be the newborn king. The magi were warned in a dream that Herod was not to be trusted. And so they changed routes, and went home another way. Here's one more lesson we can learn with the magi. When we meet Jesus, we are changed. Sometimes we're changed in a moment but most often it takes Him our whole lifetime to change us into His likeness. God's work in us is slow and persistent and like God's love for us, is relentless. We have met Jesus, and we are changed. We want power over others and He gives us a towel to wash each other's feet. We want to get our own way and He gives us a cross to carry. We want to nurse grudges and choose sides and He forgives us and helps us see our enemies through His eyes of mercy and compassion. We cry out in loneliness and fear and He reminds us of His name - Emmanuel, God-with-us - and that He'll never leave us. We have met Jesus here, in Bethlehem, and we will travel home another way... a new way... His way.

At the beginning of Advent, "The Starlit Journey to Christmas," we were all given a piece of paper to write down our wish, our prayer, for his holy season. Those prayers have been hanging on stars in the sanctuary since Christmas Eve. Can you remember what you wrote? That dream, that longing you had, to experience a more meaningful and holy Christmas? Today, on Epiphany Sunday, I ask you to remember the word you wrote. Or choose a word that is your prayer for the world. Some of the words that were written were: Peace. Hope. Love. Joy. Take a moment to choose a word that is your prayer for the world. [PAUSE]

Today, on this Epiphany Sunday, I think Jesus would give that word back to you, with His dream and His longing that you would reveal that word to the world... that you would be the manifestation of what you want for the world. That you would be hope in the world, that you would be peace in the world, that you would be love in the world.

As we journey into the new year, traveling with Jesus, and with each other... looking for Jesus in the margins, not being overly confident about where we'll find Him, open to His surprises, asking for directions, and willing to travel home another way... as we travel together may His story continue to revealed to us, and in us. And may we continue, as the magi did, to yearn for Him, to travel to Him, and to give Him our best and most precious gifts, ourselves. Amen.

I invite the Worship Leaders and the Communion servers to join me at the table, as we continue worship on the ivory -colored insert.