

## Stirring Things Up

Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

### Sermon:

An *Epiphany* is defined by Wikipedia as a “sudden and striking realization.” Think, *Eureka!* The Cambridge dictionary likewise defines it as “that moment that we become aware of something—a moment where we suddenly understand and grasp.” Think, *Aha!* Epiphany Sunday is a tradition of remembering God’s gifts to us and especially the gift of that small child born in a manger. It is a season of our communal grasping of who Christ is and why he matters.

I wonder sometimes, though, when we celebrate these wise ones who so courageously set out—whether we put too much emphasis on them on this day. I wonder sometimes whether in the season of Epiphany of watching and claiming and seeing and grasping—whether we put too much emphasis in fact on what we do. The truth is that that word *Epiphany* is not something that you or I ever do, although we do have an important role to play when one happens. Epiphany comes from the Greek *Epiphaneia* and it most definitely is not a human thing. You see, the wise men did not have an Epiphany; God did. In a biblical sense, Epiphany is a divine manifestation in the midst of human history; it is God reaching in—reaching down—and reaching through. It is God stirring things up a bit. As Luke said so beautifully in his Gospel, it is the tender mercy from God—the dawn from on high that will break upon us and give light to those who sit in darkness. Friends, we don’t have Epiphanies; God does. And yes, we do have a role to play in how we react to such miraculous events—how we take those events, build upon them and find meaning in and through them that transcends time and place—and the way that we take those Epiphanies and make them traditions to cherish and learn from.

The late Jaroslav Pelikan is a theologian whose orthodoxy would give Jonathan Edwards a run for his money. And yet Pelikan said this—“That tradition rightly practiced is the living faith of the dead—as opposed to traditionalism, which is the dead faith of the living.” It is our job in Epiphanies to practice living faith with the testimonies of those that have come before us have given us. Tradition implies status quo in so many ways, but what it really has to do with is the way we re-tell—the way we relive and the way we reshape God’s Epiphanies over the course of time and place, not just that we might grasp God but rather that we might make the space for God to grasp us—to search the skies and our lives for signs that give meaning for the way we live right now and right here. And isn’t that what we need right now—in a time where so much seems to be riding on what we do or don’t do or how we understand science or politics or systems that seem impossibly big, and ironically right now the confluence of two planets is creating what some scientists call the “Bethlehem Star.”

But we do need to be like the wise men and actually notice. For when we notice God reaching in, we can take it; we can ponder and we can retell it, letting it come further and further into light—not to own it, but rather like a flower—to let it blossom and grow, knowing that while eventually flowers do fade, yet another might bloom behind it in its place.

Few traditions of our faith have been retold, relived, reshaped, or brought to blossom more than this one of the magi from Matthew. From a simple story of unnumbered wise men from the East or wise *ones* from the East—we have retold the story until we see three people—three kings—three men, and we have even named them. We’ve aged them and given them countries of origin and a variety of hues to their skin. Matthew mentions none of this, but we know that there is Caspar, or Gaspar, as he is known—the oldest of the wise men and the bringer of the gold. He is the King of Tarsus, and we are told he’s an old man with a beard. He is the first king to kneel to Jesus with the gift of gold proclaiming the earthly kingship of Jesus. Then there is Melchior who is middle-aged (some even claim that he was a good biblical number “forty”) and who brought from his native Arabia the gift of frankincense—a gift that recognizes divinity. And finally there is Balthazar, the youngest and darkest of the three, whose skin grew darker and darker throughout the paintings of the Middle Ages, who was a young man bringing myrrh, the anointing oil for the dead.

All of this retelling the story of John Henry Hopkins’ hymn that Jack will sing for us shortly, the gifts coming to life for us in the final verse, “Glorious King behold him arise—King and God and sacrifice.” Did you know that in the Eastern Church there aren’t three magi but instead that there are twelve? Well, for other and obvious reasons they represent the twelve tribes coming back to honor Jesus as the king. There is in fact a second century book that has the magi as descendants of the third son of Adam and Eve, whose name is Seth (in case you had forgotten it). At any rate, these magi are descendants of Seth who had spent their time ever since Creation watching the skies for signs of God sending a savior to make right what was made wrong by Seth’s parents so long ago in the garden. Globally, this story has captured the imagination of all ages. In Cuba and Puerto Rico for instance, children put shoeboxes of grass out so that the camels of the wise men might have something to eat. That’s the great thing about this story; it’s retold, relived and reshaped until it goes way beyond the ten verses of Matthew, and it’s not found in any of the other Gospels.

To build upon such a story and make it your cherished tradition is not unorthodox or heretical. It's not scandalous or unbiblical; it is in fact the very thing we are supposed to do to Epiphanies—not to have them but to react to God's breaking in and stirring things up a bit. In fact, it's what we teach both our kids and our adults—both in Sunday school and in adult education—to take the stories of the Bible seriously, to look at them closely enough and root them in their context—but then let them come to life. We can get inside the stories and wonder about their meaning. It is what you and I just proclaimed we were about to do in that Call to Worship this morning. Do you remember? “God prepare our hearts to receive this light that shines.” We're not confining these in-breaking events to the death of traditionalism but rather we're using them to keep our faith life giving and living well and to get inside these stories, so that like those wise men, we too might be overcome with joy.

So the question for this Epiphany is how do we take this great tradition of magi and star and continue to retell, reshape and relive it ourselves so that God's love and light radically in-breaks our lives, not simply as a tradition to guard and hold and monitor and keep boxed in or as an enactment to get right—but rather to be as bold as we are in Stockbridge to have wise ones from the time of Christ processing with a traffic flare. There is light that can break down upon us even now—a new dawn in most unexpected ways coming on this day.

In Matthew's Gospel, the story of Christmas and the story of the magi are not cozy and safe stories to be cherished; rather they are stories of radical reversal that bring fear to the comfortable and comfort to the fearful; they're stories where strangers come to the king sitting on a throne decked in robes and boldly ask him where the *real* king is, only to be amazed to find him lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling clothes. There are stories of the unexpected and the unimagined where regal gifts from those who have so much are offered to a poor child. There are stories where lives change, not just for the point of the narrative but to remind us that our lives can and should change too. Today, let's not celebrate the discovery of the wise men nor the tales that surround them; instead let's celebrate God's Epiphany—God's breaking in—God's reaching down and reaching through in the midst of human history to stir things up a bit, and in the end— isn't that exactly what we need?

Amen.

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