

Sermon – Feast of the Epiphany

Matthew 2: 1-12

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. While tomorrow is the actual day we transfer our remembrance to today because it is such an ancient celebration for the Church, commemorating a major revelation from God.

The Feast of the Epiphany celebrates the manifestation of the boy Jesus to the nomadic wanderers from the east, sometime within the first two years of his life, and certainly prior to King Herod's murderous slaughter of the innocent boys of Bethlehem. The Epiphany of our Lord Jesus Christ is an important commemoration because it was the first time that Jesus was revealed to non-Jews, meaning that the incarnation of God was not solely intended for the those of Jewish faith. God was for everyone and so Jesus had to be introduced to the wider world in a way that was truly revelatory.

The magi, or so-called 'wise men,' were in fact the equivalent of today's scientists, or more accurately astronomers. The name 'magi' is derived from an ancient Persian name for a religious caste of people called Zoroastrians. As part of their religion they paid particular attention to the stars in the heavens and had an international reputation for astrology, which at the time was considered an advanced science. Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest continually practiced religions, which suggests it had been quite advanced in its understanding of the universe, when they first identified a strange new star.

There are many theories on the reason these people followed a new star but it is likely that within their religion the sign of a new star was the sign of fulfillment of a part of their own prophetic history. What is important for us to always remember is that God was at work in bringing these people from another country to be witnesses for the birth of a new king, the King of the Jews.

King Herod, the Roman client king of Judea, was not a nice man. The Roman Senate had appointed him as King of the Jews, enabling him to conquer the kingdom for Rome. When Herod heard that a baby had been born and given the same title of King of the Jews, someone who might ultimately challenge him for the throne and kingdom, he became paranoid because he had been continually under threat of losing his kingdom. King Herod was a despot and used the levers of power to suppress dissent, spy on his people and generally control all aspects of life for the people of Judea.

The tight control he exercised over his kingdom meant he knew when this caravan of Zoroastrian priests arrived in town from Persia. He dutifully arranged to meet with them to find out what they were doing. Not wanting to reveal his true intentions he asked that these men report back and tell him where the new king was living because he too would like to pay homage.

The magi continued to pursue the mystery of the new star and eventually come to find Jesus, Mary and Joseph. They recognize fulfillment of the prophecy and the majesty of the new boy king and offered him precious gifts, gifts fit for a king. In a dream, God's favorite method of communication, they were warned not to go back to Herod and so when they left they took a different road back to their country. Of course this enraged Herod who undertook the genocide of the young boys in Bethlehem.

The epiphany is all about the manifestation of the divinity of Jesus to those outside of the Jewish religious population of Judea. God revealed to these people the mystery of God's incarnation. The magi followed their own spiritual guidance and showed up to meet the baby Jesus, the new King. They had an intuitive understanding of the mystery that was inherent in the new star that appeared in the skies of their country.

I find there are two key takeaways from the story of the epiphany. The first is that God chose to reveal the boy Jesus to the world outside of the Jewish faith. Jesus was for everyone. Second, the magi showed up having followed the sign God gave them. Hopefully we can relate to both of these actions of God because this is how God works in our lives too. God prompts us through dreams and mysterious signs and then reveals things to us that ultimately make sense to our lives and can change the direction of our lives.

The story of the Apostle Paul is a great example. The reading this morning from the Letter to the Ephesians, tells of the Apostle Paul showing up after receiving one of the biggest prompts of God in the Bible. Buy why Paul? He was a ruthless zealot for his faith, persecuting the new followers of Jesus Christ. He was violent and unrelenting. He stood by as the crowds stoned to death the Deacon Stephen.

Paul probably had as many questions about God's intervention in his life through Jesus Christ as we might. He had time to ponder Jesus' revelation as he sat in the darkness of blindness. He told the Galatians that after his sight was restored he went out into desert of Arabia and to Damascus. The desert stillness gave him time to discern the commission he had been given. Paul was utterly transformed.

Paul first had to make sense of the revelation of God before he was able to take that message out into the world. His message to the church in Ephesus was that Jesus Christ had been made manifest to him and that the mystery of Jesus was now revealed to all nations. The mystery of Christ was the inclusion of the gentile peoples in God's all-embracing love. V6 “.. the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel.”

God needed someone like Paul, with his energy and focus, to be the leading witness to the Gentiles. And Paul showed up! Paul needed every bit of his character to sustain himself in his ministry. He said that he served Christ with humility and tears showing how had he found the

ministry to which we was called. All these years later, Paul's testimony and witness is still guiding people to a deeper relationship with Jesus.

Paul encouraged the fledgling churches to come together in unity and godly living and to set an example for the rest of the community. The epiphany of Jesus to Paul is no less important than the epiphany of Jesus to the magi, and the epiphany of Jesus to each one of us. Paul never met Jesus in person but believed and discerned the mystery before him.

This is now our work to do. It is the church today, the church facing a new decade of life, that is to show up for Jesus and reveal Jesus the Christ to the world. The world continues to transform itself in many wonderful, yet also troubling ways, but the message of hope and love and acceptance that Jesus brought into the world will never diminish.

God chose to reveal Jesus to the world through his people, powered on by the Holy Spirit. God's love was for all and not just a specific group. God continues to reveal Jesus to us in ways that are not always straightforward. Like the parables Jesus spoke, God's revelations require us to reflect deeply on them to find the right answer. Most often the true revelation is not what is obvious.

With the dawn of this new year our efforts to define the way God is revealing Godself to us here in this community will evolve. We will be patient, prayerful, determined and wise in listening for the commission God is giving to us as a church community, and us individually.

We each have a contribution to make whether it be telling us your own faith history in this church, or be it in discerning the way God is calling us to minister to our needs and the needs of the community going forward. We need prayer warriors. We need story tellers. We need visionaries. We need brave and courageous people to show up for Jesus, to marshal the resources necessary for this important Jubilee ministry.

Jesus has been revealed to you and this community over and over again. At Christmas for Kids a number of us felt God's revelation that there are a lot of people in this community needing us to get organized. We had 96 people attend the service and only a handful were from our regular Sunday congregations. We were told there are many who want to volunteer to serve the community's needs. The volunteers just desire a focus here, not in other neighborhoods. There was a young singer who expressed an interest in the choir. Some who expressed interest in Sunday School. All this came from a service we didn't promote. How much more desire for connection is there in the neighborhood?

God is stirring the Holy Spirit for us. We are the wise people who are showing up to see God's revelation and to take it out into the world. We enter tomorrow the season of Epiphany and with it the season we will start to form these initiatives. We need you! God needs you! Our community needs you!

Amen