

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

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January 4, 2009

Epiphany of the Lord

2nd Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 60:1-6

1 Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.
2 For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.
3 Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,
2 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."
3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;
4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.
5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:
6 '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.'"
7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.
8 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."
9 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.
10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.
11 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.

12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

“Your Emerging Epiphanies”

Where to go? What to do? What’s next, and how do we get there? How will we know when we have arrived? How will we know when we have made it to the place where we should be?

Philosophical questions, oh yes, indeed they are. But more practically speaking getting where you are going is a whole lot easier these days than it ever was. The GPS has emerged on the scene as a device for popular use.

You can now pick one up for around a hundred dollars, and it can point your way towards anything and anywhere that you want to get. It uses the satellites and identifies your position along the way. You can program it for a destination or do as I did not long ago when I was in southern Anne Arundel County and wanted to get home. I pressed the button that simply says, “home” and the thing computed the most direct route for me to take and told me—yes, it talks—in turn-by-turn directions how to get there.

Gone are the days of needing to call ahead to get directions or even needing a printed map. Those days are long gone. I grew up on the Great Plains where one learns their directions and also can generally know how they are traveling by the position of the sun. The people there will talk about going a mile north and then two miles west rather than saying, as we do around here, “at the second stop light turn left, and then...”

It used to be that I would orient myself by where the Presbyterian Churches are positioned. Even to this day when I talk about Harford County in my mind is a map not so much of the major roads or regions, but rather there are those significant landmarks—the Presbyterian Churches.

To this day if I am somewhere and someone asks me directions, I first have to orient myself by the position of our other churches.

It is not always easy getting directions these days. If you do not have a GPS and you are not familiar with those major landmarks it can be a challenge. People are not so quick to lend aid to offer up a course and there no longer are service station attendants...does anyone remember those neatly dressed windshield washing, oil checking fellows?

No, without a GPS it is not easy getting direction.

It was no easier in the ancient world. Those wise folks of old who paused in their journey came to the palace of the local monarch and asked where was the new-born king. They had come to worship and adore him.

They had seen the star and followed it. But being in the neighborhood was not good enough. They needed to know the exact location in order to find him and worship him.

Bethlehem—they needed to head towards Bethlehem.

And they found him. And worshiped him. Offering gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. They returned to their country along a route which avoided Herod.

The Magi.

We love this old story of those wise guys following that “star of wonder star of might, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding,” guide them to that perfect light.

We tell the story, unsure of the exact time of their arrival, but usually pinning it to some twelve days after the nativity.

We like to analyze in detail the gifts they bring. The rarest and most precious of metals, the incense and oils of royalty used in preparation for a dead body—a foreshadow perhaps?

Did they know? Were they so wise that they knew this was a king born to die? Did they know that the throne he would sit on would be a cross on which he hung? Did they know? Were they so wise?

I doubt they knew. I'm sure they did not. No one did. "Mary, did you know?" Not her either. Even those closest to Jesus could not understand or comprehend it. These Magi guys they could not have known.

Their wisdom was not so wise as to know or even understand. Their wisdom may not even been so deep as to comprehend the irony of the gifts they brought. Their wisdom, their real wisdom was found in the fact, that they came. They came to the that place. They found him, they worshiped him, they adored him.

You see, the real wisdom of the Magi was not their gifts or their keen insight that this star burst in the sky was worth seeking after.

Their real wisdom—the real epiphany here—was found in the fact that they sought out the new-born king. They sought out and sought after Jesus.

Did they fit the mold of the sort of folks that should be seeking him out?

No. Were they Jewish? No.

Were they looking for a Messiah to deliver Israel? No. No.

Maybe, just maybe the shepherds could have been looking for such a one, at least they probably heard about it in church, but these wise guys? No way.

That's their real wisdom—they knew—they knew Jesus was for them too. That's their part of the Christmas miracle. The knowing that Jesus was for them.

From the shepherds we learn that Jesus was not sent merely to the religious elite or to the Jewish power brokers, but to the ordinary folks. The laborers in the fields, the regular ones they are the ones to whom the angels announce, "born to you a Savior who is Christ the Lord." The lesson of the shepherds is that he came for the ordinary folks.

And from the wise guys, from these delightful Magi of old we learn that Jesus was not merely for the traditional folk. He was not merely for the Jews but for all. Yes, for them too—that odd band of star following folk. For those foreigners who were not familiar with the land, not familiar with the Scriptures which announced Bethlehem. Jesus was for them too. They knew it, that's their wisdom.

That is what emerges here—He was for them too!

Do we get it?

Are we so wise? Do we know it too?

Think about it.

Do you deserve Jesus? Are you from the “house and lineage of David?”

Are you Jewish? Are you the chosen people? Did God deliver you out of the land of Egypt? Were Abraham and Sarah your distant relatives?

Think about it?

Do you deserve Jesus? Was he to be born your Messiah?

Do we deserve Jesus? No. We don't. Was he to be born our Messiah? Yes. Yes!

That is the wisdom part—knowing that.

So often we as Christians begin to forget that. We start to think that you have to be some sort of religious super hero in order to have a relationship with Christ. You don't have to be—you just have to come to him—seek him out and worship him.

Or we think you have to be part of the tradition. You need to fit in—just so—you need to look and talk and act and even think like a “Christian” looks, and acts, and thinks. It's all smiles and no sarcasm. You know the ideal Christian life where there are answers to questions. No, the Magi were not part of that tradition either.

Yet—they knew—they knew that Jesus was for them too. They knew. And we need to know. Jesus is for us. Even us. Traditional and not-so-traditional—he's for us. Even us.

Knowing that, however, is not enough. We also must begin to ask the questions such knowing and such wisdom begs: “Who?”

“Who? Who have we left out because they are not traditional...or even close to anything that resembles tradition or resembles us? They don’t fit the mold. Who have we excluded?”

Maybe even ourselves. Do we see ourselves as on the outside? As a foreigner looking in...

The wisdom of the Magi—their GPS, their right on and knew their direction in life moment was knowing that they fit with this Savior, Messiah God.

It is the emergence of Epiphany and the glory of God—there are no outsiders. There are no foreigners. There are no miss-fits. There are no right ones and wrong ones. There are no classes of people excluded and there are no perfect Christians or even better ones...

The wisdom is knowing...

The wisdom is at the point of decision to seek him out....

The wisdom is found in our coming and worshiping him..

The wisdom is found in our adoration of our Messiah. “A Savior born to us.”

That is wisdom. When that appears—we have it. We are going..we are on the road!

The Magi, the wisdom of you and I: “they bowed down and they worshiped him.”

That is the orientation—that is the GPS place in life where it makes sense—it is the only place in this world where it will all come together for us—“they bowed down and they worshiped him.” Amen.