

Behold the Light
A Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12
Epiphany of the Lord
January 6, 2019

Introduction

We tend to overlook Epiphany on the church calendar. It hasn't made its way as a holiday onto the secular calendar. We don't go to Hallmark and buy Epiphany cards. We don't have the family over for Epiphany dinner. When we come to Epiphany on the lectionary, we focus on the story of the wise men. They have become part of the Christmas pageant. Nativity scenes show the wise men together with the shepherds at the manger. Epiphany is turned into the close of the Christmas season.

Epiphany is one of the oldest holidays on the church calendar. Christians have been celebrating Epiphany longer than they have been celebrating Christmas. The Eastern Church has been celebrating Epiphany since the third century. The Western church began celebrating Christmas a century later.

I would like to leave the Christmas pageant behind and focus on the meaning of Epiphany today. We will talk about the story of the wise men only as it relates to Epiphany. And we won't call them wise men; we will use the Greek word, μάγοι, or magi.

First Move: The Light in the Sky

The Greek word, ἐπιφάνω, is transliterated into English as epiphany. It has two primary meanings: shine and reveal. In secular Greek it is used with the sun and the moon; they shine upon us. For Christians, it symbolizes the light of Christ, shining upon us. ἐπιφάνω also means to show, to appear, to reveal oneself. It is a synonym for revelation or manifestation. It is when the invisible is made visible. Epiphany is often described as the manifestation of Christ to the world, the first time that it becomes apparent that Jesus is the Christ. The story of the magi and the turning of wine into water at the wedding in Cana are the two lectionary readings associated with Epiphany.

Using light as a symbol for Jesus also draws on the image of a king bringing relief to his people from oppression. Commentators believe that Matthew's story of the magi is a midrash upon Isaiah 60:1-6. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." God is liberating the Israelites from their

exile in Babylon. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” The magi were seen as Gentile kings who are drawn by the light in Israel. “A multitude of camels shall cover you, . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” The Gentile kings will come on camels and bring gifts of gold and frankincense. Matthew tends to describe Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament scripture.

The first references to magi in secular Greek were to a priestly class in Babylon. It later expanded to include astrologers. The magi studied the stars. There was a popular belief that there was a star for every person, great people had bright stars, ordinary people had dim ones. The stars brightened at a person’s birth and dimmed at their death. Legend has it that when Alexander the Great was born, magi prophesied that the conqueror of Asia had been born.

The magi believe that the star symbolizes the birth of a great king. The magi want to worship the new-born king. Worship is both a political and a religious term. It means to bow down before, to fall on your face at the feet of. It is a sign of the respect that must be shown when greeting a king.

By tracking the star to Jerusalem, the magi associate the star with a new king of the Judeans. That gives the story a political twist. Judea already has a king, Herod, and he is not eager to give up his place to a new king. Herod tries to snuff out the light. In Isaiah 60, Herod represents darkness. “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.”

The magi respond to a natural revelation, but they must come to Jerusalem to understand its significance. They ask Herod where they can find the new king. Herod asks the educated elite, the chief priests and scribes. They quote from Micah 5:2. It was written while Israel is in exile and looks forward to a time when a ruler from Bethlehem will rise to shepherd the people. The ideal ruler is a shepherd who cares for the people instead of building up his own power.

The magi follow the star to Bethlehem, where it stands over the house where Jesus is. Virgil wrote that a star guided Aeneas to the site where Rome was built. The text says that Jesus lives in a house not a manger and it describes Jesus as a young child not a baby. The wise men arrived much later than the shepherds in Luke’s Christmas story.

The magi rejoiced with extremely great joy when they found the child Jesus. Joy is the natural response when we come into the presence of God.

The magi were also known to be interpreters of dreams. This was considered to be a spiritual gift. They returned to their land by another way. The theologian

Stanley Hauerwas writes that the magi would have been reluctant to go home, given the joy they experienced in finding the Christ child. They were obedient to the instructions they received in the dream and gave witness in a distant land to the joy they experienced. This was another gift from the magi.

Second Move: The Inner Light

Some of Mary's Mother's Day Out students are a little slower than others. Mary had one student who didn't know any of the colors. Mary went over the colors with him every day and he still couldn't tell you what red was. Another student didn't know any of the letters after a year in pre-K. He couldn't even tell you what letter his first name began with.

Mary was patient with them. She said you never know when the light is going to come on. Their second year with Mary they were different students. The light came on.

When did the light come on in your life? You started your faith journey as a Christian with your baptism, but did the light come on then? Or was it later? Are you still waiting for it?

The light of Epiphany can have a political reading, a clash of the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Herod. It can also have a spiritual meaning. The light can symbolize inner illumination. It is when the Christian wisdom finally dawns on you. It is when you make the way of Christ your way of life.

The light of Christ came to me through its reflection in John Dear and Richard Rohr. For my entire adult life I had been a pacifist opposed to war and an admirer of Martin Luther King's nonviolent resistance, but John Dear helped me see non-violence as a way of life. The way most people talk to each other is violent; we need to learn how a new way of talking to each other, where the goal is understanding and sharing each other's thoughts rather than persuading the other person to come around to our way of thinking.

Richard Rohr helped me deepen my spirituality and discover the mystics. He helped me move from a dualistic way of seeing the world--light and darkness, good and evil--toward a unitive consciousness, seeing the connection between all things and our connection with God. The mystics have been focusing on God, making God and Christ the center of their consciousness, since the days of the desert fathers.

We have joy when the light comes into our lives. Mary and I saw that when we went to Norway. We spent four days on Svalbard, an island just 650 miles from the North Pole. It is the farthest north inhabited place on the planet. Mary and I were there in August when it is the land of the midnight sun, 24 hours of sunlight every

day. From mid-November through mid-March, it is Arctic winter. The sun doesn't rise for four months. We asked people how they made it through the winter. A tour guide told us she slept 13 or 14 hours a day. It is hard to get up in the middle of darkness. The biggest holiday of the year is early March, when they celebrate the return of the sun. It is a week-long festival. They call it the Sun Festival. The light brings joy to the people of Svalbard.

We are a happy church. I think that is the strongest sign of the health of our congregation. The next step is to be a joyful church.

When the light shines on us, it draws us home. We can simply rest in God. We are no longer bound; we have been liberated. We are no longer wandering. We are no longer searching for meaning. By simply resting in God, we are filled with peace and joy. We reflect God's glory.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells the disciples, "You are the light of the world, a city on a hill. Let your light shine before all people." Share your peace and joy with all people.

Who are the Gentiles today, the ones who will be drawn to the light of the world? Hope Partnership tells us it is the nones and the dones. The people who have no religious affiliation and the people who have had bad experiences in church and don't want to have anything more to do with church.

That will be a challenge, and we will have to have humility. Our attitude can't be, you are sitting in darkness and we are bringing you the light. No one will listen to that. Martha Grace Reece [remember her?], the author of *Unbinding the Gospel*, says that churches grow when their members are set on fire for Christ, when they tell the people who are close to them what a difference Christ makes in their lives and how their church brought them closer to Christ.

The Millennials and the iGeneration probably see us as sitting in the darkness. They have grown up with iPhones and social media and information technology, and we are still novices. Mary has had an iPhone for three years and she still doesn't have any apps. We can learn from each other. Each of us has a light to help dispel the darkness in which the other is sitting.

Conclusion

Perhaps we are the magi who come to offer gifts to a younger generation. We have seen the light and it has filled us with joy. That joy is the greatest gift we can offer. Together we can behold the light.