

“Let’s Try Something Different This Year”

Sunday, January 3, 2021

Epiphany of the Lord

Matthew 2:1-12

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It’s safe to say a whole lot of us were not upset to say goodbye to 2020 the other evening. It was such a long and tough year that it is hard to believe it was only 12 months long—just like every year.

Our neighborhood erupted with the sound of firecrackers and car horns, whooping and hollering as 2020 became part of the past.

And while it feels good to let go of that albatross, we also know this:
There is still widespread poverty and illness
There is still grief and loneliness,
There is still racism and injustices,
There is still a deadly global pandemic.

So as the wisemen round the corner and spot the infant child this morning, the question that is on my mind is this: what are we going to do differently in this new year?

Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ – is the realization that the child in the manger is the Living God who will lead us toward life abundant. And, before you say anything, yes, I know that officially Epiphany is not until Wednesday. There are plenty of other challenges at the moment, and getting Presbyterians to come to worship on a Wednesday is not one of them. But on this Sunday closest to Epiphany let us explore the new possibilities of faith through the eyes of those secretive sages, the mysterious magi whose adoration of Christ invites us to see the holiness of God incarnate.

In many Christmas pageants, the arrival of the wisemen offers a bit of comic relief. It comes after the seriousness of Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay has subsided, and long after the shepherds have headed back to their normal routines. The scene switches from the sweetness of sheep mingling with angels to somewhat even more unbelievable arrival of strangers on camels bearing gifts. Skinny legged teenage boys wearing crowns and holding gifts stride into the sanctuary, trying their best to look regal and mysterious, their tennis shoes peaking out below bathrobes. Snickering beneath their fake beards, they look more like the Three Stooges than the Three Wisemen, but what are you going to do?

I think Matthew would nod his head in agreement at these slightly off-key representations of the magi. He has told us that Jesus shall be “Emmanuel,” or “God With us,” and now begins to

weave a tale of legendary proportions. He is, after all, the only one of the Gospel writers to tell us this story, and I believe he may have told it with a slight twinkle in his eye. Imagine Matthew regaling the church with the angel's pronouncement to Joseph. He holds his audience on the edges of their seats recounting God's promise to Joseph.

A second later, the scene shifts. Matthew indulges in a bit of comic relief. "Imagine this," he tells us, "out of nowhere show up a band of starry-eyed dreamers who show up in the capital city asking a somewhat paranoid king where they might find the newborn challenger to his throne."

Herod may not have been paranoid, but he also knows that doesn't mean people aren't out to get you. The magi's words scare him. "What is this?" he thinks. "A new conspiracy? Some sort of rogue actor, or a deep-state attack on my power?" The news rattles him, and when the king is worried, the entire city is worried as well.

Over the centuries we have tried to embellish this story. We've enhanced and inflated it, rounding off its terrifying edges by placing crowns on the heads of the magi, numbering them and giving them names.

Remember, Matthew does not tell us how many magi there were, nor is he particularly concerned about whether they rode camels, donkeys or bicycles. We are left trying to imagine how riding on the back of a camel across the desert for thousands of miles makes you wise. Think about that for a moment.

What he tells us is they were guided by a star, and what they found changed their entire lives. "They left for their own country by another road."

There is a very good chance that the magi were actually priests of an ancient religion known as Zoroastrianism, which means they might have come from Iran. Or they could have been stargazers, astrologers who followed the stars to understand the purpose of life. Whoever they were or were not, it is clear that the point Matthew wants to make is that God's light had summoned not the religious people of Israel, but strangers. They were foreigners, Gentiles...the ones excluded from Israel's worship and life.

But they were among the first to worship Christ. They were the first to see that the true King of Israel is not robed with power, but is instead a helpless infant, a child who would grow up to be wounded for his people.

They see through the vile plans of Herod, and instead of becoming paralyzed by fear, they make a change in their plans.

I don't mean to rob "We Three Kings" of its meaning as a beloved Christmas carol. Instead, consider the risks the magi undertook. Think about the pain involved in leaving your homeland behind. Think of how others would have mocked them for following a star. Consider how we find it strange when someone says to us, "I just felt as though I had to do this."

Think of the way their lives had changed.

I love the way W. H. Auden's lets the voices of the magi be heard in his long poem, "For the Time Being."

The weather has been awful,
The countryside is dreary,
Marsh, jungle, rock; and echoes mock,
Calling our hope unlawful;
But a silly song can help along
Yours ever and sincerely:
At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
that this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
and miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
but have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
To discover how to be human now
Is the reason we follow this star."

Not kings, but strangers following a star and bringing gifts. Their very presence shatters the status quo, upsetting the political landscape with the suggestion that God has somehow slipped into this world unannounced. And when it is all said and done, they go home a different way.

This is the story we need to hear on this Epiphany Sunday, 2021.

They were not kings. They were strangers, called to follow a star.

They were summoned out of their circumstances in search of something new, something different. That may sound romantic or nostalgic because the typical way of organizing our lives today is to put ourselves at the forefront and make choices based on what we want to achieve.

Throughout 2020, we have watched as many of the pleasures of life have slipped through our fingers. We have watched friends and family lose jobs. We have seen the evil that the coronavirus can bring. We've wondered "what is this moment teaching us?"

Writer David Brooks notes that throughout history, however, there are times when people have found meaning and purpose in life not by asking what's in it for them but instead asking different questions. In a sense, this is what happened to the magi. They were summoned from the chaos of their lives. And in that moment they found meaning and purpose by asking a different set of questions. Not "what do I want to do," but "What does life want from me? What are my circumstances calling me to do?" The magi were not content with the answers they had received. They wanted more out of their lives – more meaning, more purpose.

"Your job," says Brooks is to "figure certain things out: what does this environment need in order to be made whole? What is it that needs repair? What tasks are lying around waiting to be performed?"

In his book “The Road to Character,” Brooks writes about people who have lived what he describes as the summoned life – a life that responds to God’s interventions and says, “This is not what I planned for myself, but here I am, and what do I need to do?”

Look around you. What star is shining on you? Where might it lead you? What light does it shine on your life, and where are you invited to change? This is a pressing question not only for individuals, but also for the church, and beyond the church to the world. How will we be different in this New Year? How might we welcome those who appear to us as strangers, only to discover they are bringing us gifts. How might we challenge the Herod’s of today—speaking truth, offering healing, pointing to justice that shines across a dark world.

Follow the star. See where it leads, and offer to God whatever you have brought with you..
Amen.