

Sermon: Epiphany

The Rev. Mike Wernick

January 6, 2019

Year C

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalms 72:1-7,10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

This is the first Sunday we worship together in 2019... so Happy Gregorian-Calendar New Year... but we're in a time of overlapping Abrahamic beginnings... the Jewish new year began on September 9 at Rosh Hashanah... the Muslim new year began on September 10 at Hijri... and the Christian new year began on December 2 at Advent... or on November 11 if you're in the Two Churches' universe... but the shortest day this season... just a few weeks ago... the day winter began... was December 21... and every day since then... daylight has been increasing by a few minutes each day... today... as we celebrate The Epiphany... we will have nine hours and ten minutes of light...

Epiphany comes from the Greek... and refers to the manifestation of Christ to the people of the earth... during the first centuries of the Christian Era... and in some places... the winter solstice was celebrated on January 6... in opposition to pagan festivals... Christians chose this day to celebrate the various manifestations... or *epiphanies*... of Jesus' divinity... showings of his divinity which included his birth... the coming of the Magi... his baptism... and the wedding at Cana where he performed his first miracle... the day was called The Feast of Lights... and the celebration of the Son of God... replaced the celebration of the sun... a star...

The word *epiphany* also has another meaning... a sudden flash of understanding or insight... as in... *I've seen the light*... and this theme of light... is echoed in today's reading from Isaiah... *arise... shine... for your light has come*... Isaiah also records that *kings would come to the brightness of your dawn*... and would bring gold and

frankincense... our tradition adds myrrh... as a symbol for Christ's burial... and about which we'll sing... in v. 4 of the post-sermon hymn...

But scripture says nothing about how many wise men there were... or what their names were... though we've come to know them as Gaspar... Balthasar... and Melchior... and the Gospel says they followed a star...

Many of you will remember my interest in astronomy... I used to have a computer program... that could recreate the night sky... from anywhere on earth... past... present... or future... and I thought it'd be really cool... you know... to know which star it was that the Magi saw... so I got the latitude and longitude of Bethlehem... and figured out what part of the sky would be right overhead... and recreated the night sky on December 25... two-thousand and nineteen years ago... as though I was the only one who ever thought to do this... but there was nothing right overhead that seemed like it could be that star... and besides... Jesus almost certainly wasn't born on that date... and there was no Gregorian calendar then anyway... but people were drawn to the light that came out of Bethlehem...

Michael Fonseca, Ph.D... author and spiritual director writes... the Magi were wise men from the East... most likely the Kingdom of Persia... the Book of Daniel tells us that magi were among the highest-ranking officials in Babylon... around 537 BCE... Persia had conquered Babylon where Daniel had been taken into exile as a youth... and because God revealed the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream to him... Daniel was made ruler of the whole province of Babylon... and chief prefect... none of the other wise men were able to provide the right answer...

And as a *magos*... a wise man himself... Daniel risked his life... and pleaded successfully for the lives of the other magi who had failed to interpret the king's dream correctly... it seems safe to assume that the wise men learned from Daniel about the

one true God of Israel... and the coming of the Son of Man... as is recounted in Daniel 7:13...

Fonseca writes... tradition has it that the Magi traveled about 900 miles to get to Bethlehem... our Gospel text... *Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?*... but the Greek simply says... *Where was born the King of the Jews*... and although many of our nativities show the wise men bringing gifts to the infant in a manger... scripture says... they sought Jesus the child... and not Jesus the baby...

The Magi probably arrived after Simeon's prophecy... in which he said... this child is destined to be a sign that will be opposed... because the inner thoughts of many will be revealed... but they surely arrived before the Flight into Egypt... and they seemed to have taken Daniel 9:24-27 seriously... because it included a prophecy and timeline for the birth of the Messiah... that a shepherd would be king...

This star that guided them to Jesus fits into the same category as the *burning bush*... *a pillar of fire by night*... *a consuming fire on top of the mountain*... seeing this star meant that the eyes of the Magi saw God's light clearly... although they were probably pretty disappointed... that considering all that had been revealed to them... no one in Jerusalem... not even Herod himself... could tell them where to find Jesus...

But however they arrived... when Magi come... wealth comes... earthly wisdom comes... and power comes... and all that the world holds dear... all that is deemed valuable and attractive and meaningful in the world... comes and bows down... and is laid down... before the fullness of God in human form... this is Matthew's way of affirming that the wise men know that they... and all of us... need Jesus' divine wisdom... that it's for all people... and that this wisdom undoes the labels some people apply to Others... to making them *less than*...

So it's interesting to note... that although they got all the way to Jerusalem on their own... although they knew from reading the prophet Micah... that Jesus was born in Bethlehem... although they followed his star at its rising... they stopped... perhaps to ask if the King had heard about the incarnate Christ... it's interesting to note... that not only Herod but all of Jerusalem was frightened... perhaps because they did not... and that although the Magi describe Jesus as the King of the Jews... Herod names him as Messiah...

Arise... for your light has come... look up... not to a celestial body... but to Wisdom that has come down... to wisdom and light that is brought into community... the light to which the Magi... the Gentiles were drawn... transcends division... because God's Wisdom enlightens all people... it's how Jesus' power will upend the powerful...

But we know that Herod tried to trick them... Herod called them with bad intent... he called them secretly... and this kind of secret is never Good News... when Herod sends them on to search for the child... and tells them to bring him word... the apparently moving star stopped overhead... stopped being elusive... became accessible...

What Herod attempted to do... what powerful people do to hold on to their power... is kill their enemies... even if they're children... so the only people left are their friends... but the role of the church is to let our light shine... the purpose of the church is to reveal God's Wisdom to rulers... so that the words of hope contained in today's Psalm are made real...

Give the leader your justice... O God... and your righteousness to those who succeed them... that they may rule all people righteously... and the poor with justice... for they shall deliver the poor who cries out in distress... and the oppressed who has no helper... and shall preserve the lives of the needy...

I don't believe for a moment that we lack the ability... so far at least... we only lack the will... perhaps the collective maturity... we're just in a time of overlapping beginnings... of Herods and Wise Men... but no matter what calendar we follow... no matter what equinox we celebrate... the light of Christ will continue to increase... and that's the joy that the Magi understood... because every day... a new year begins...

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