

"Seeking the Divine" – Matthew 2:1-12 – January 8, 2017

The Season of Christmas officially ended this past last Friday. The Christmas season is the shortest of all the seasons of the liturgical year, a mere twelve days. You all know the song - six geese a' laying, or eight maids a' milking, and of course the partridge in a pear tree. Christmas is now officially over, and we will be packing up the decorations after worship today. January 6 began the Season of Epiphany. Today is the Sunday where we talk about the Magi and the star and the journey to Bethlehem. It is about gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is about the very first Gentiles to pay homage to the baby Jesus, who came into the world, not just for the Jewish nation, but for all people. Epiphany seems to fit in well with the New Year.

The New Year is about new beginnings. A fresh start. A chance to consider different options. Or sometimes it's simply a time to step back and examine where we are in our lives. To take a hard look at the path that we're on, to see if it's taking us in the direction we need to go. I remember that back in high school and college I was very serious about the whole idea of making New Year's resolutions.

I would think long and hard about where I was in life, and where I thought I needed to be going. It was at the time in my life that I had first become intrigued by a concept presented by a motivational speaker. He said that excellence was a journey not a destination. The idea that wherever we wanted to go in life, how we got there was much more important than actually getting there. What we did along the way, meant more than the final goal. What we did in the moments of everyday life was much more significant than attaining future success. For me that concept was an epiphany in my life and changed how I looked at the world.

If you look up epiphany in the dictionary, you'll see that it has more than one meaning. When we say that someone has had an epiphany, we are referring to a new understanding, a type of "aha" experience. It is also defined as an intuitive grasp of reality through something such as an event or occurrence. Furthermore, the word epiphany can refer to an appearance or manifestation, especially of a divine being. Our story from Matthew's gospel contains all these elements of meaning.

Matthew's reason for including this story was to show his audience that the arrival of the baby Jesus had worldwide significance. He didn't just come as the Messiah for the Jews; he came for the entire human race.

The story begins with some wise men from the East looking for the new King of the Jews. Against popular perception, the magi were not kings. Rather, they were more like priests, perhaps Persian or Babylonian, and they were experts in the occult, skilled in astrology and dream interpretation. They certainly held some kind of status otherwise King Herod would have never received them into his court. In the ancient world, it was not uncommon to associate unique astral phenomenon to signal important earthly events, such as kingly births. Thus these gentile astrologers saw a sign in the sky, and it must have been significant enough for them to prepare a journey.

Herod was a feared king and a puppet of the Roman Empire. While he was known as Herod the Great, he had a rather nasty character flaw - he was insanely suspicious, paranoid and jealous. He murdered his wife and mother-in-law and assassinated three of his own sons.

Imagine if you will, what a man like this would do if he heard rumors that a new king had been born. The magi had probably journeyed straight toward Jerusalem, assuming that the new king would be

there. Jerusalem was the capital city, and the star seemed to point in that direction. When they arrived in town, they began asking for directions. Their strange inquiries would have spread among the people. Herod most likely had spies on the streets of Jerusalem, and these tales of baby born to be King of the Jews would have reached him quickly. Now to a suspicious and paranoid man, this sent up a warning signal. As the text in Matthew states, this news troubled King Herod. But it also troubled all of Jerusalem.

I don't know the origin of the quote, "If mama's not happy, ain't nobody happy." You all get what that means. The same could be said about Herod. When he was upset about something, his ire spilled over onto everyone else, and bad things would result. And as we heard last week, Herod's actions were devastating.

Perhaps another king would have dismissed these foreign astrologers, but even the barest hint of a rival to his power stirred Herod's paranoia. He called his own group of wise men together – the chief priests and the scribes. Herod asked them about the Messiah's birthplace. They quoted to him the scripture that gave the location to be the town of Bethlehem and linked the Messiah with King David. Bethlehem had been the hometown of King David. Feigning curiosity and expressing his own desire to pay homage to the new king, Herod summoned the magi back to him and asked them to tell him the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them on to Bethlehem, just 9 miles south of Jerusalem and told them to return once they had found the child.

The magi continued on their way, now with both the star to guide them and the revelation from scripture to point the way. Soon the magi arrived at the home of Joseph and Mary. The passage in Matthew tells us they were overwhelmed with joy. They paid him homage, meaning they adored and worshipped the child, and then they gave to him expensive and precious gifts.

When it was time for them to leave, things got interesting. The magi were warned by God in a dream to return home by a different route. They had had an epiphany. They came face to face with the divine and their world changed in an instant. They decided to disobey Herod's command to return to him in Jerusalem, and they chose to take a different road home.

Metaphorically speaking, when a person comes face to face with Jesus Christ, the world, and how we perceive it, changes. Our life path takes a new direction. When the divine breaks through into the mundane, our old understandings slip away, and we begin to look at the world through God's eyes.

And this I think is where the season of Epiphany touches our lives. It forces us to examine the path that we're traveling. Like I learned so many years ago, the journey is much more important than the destination. What we do along the way makes all the difference. The message of Epiphany charges us to examine how we live in the everyday ordinariness. What principles govern our actions?

There's a story told by an Episcopal priest named Bob Libby in his book *Grace Happens*. He tells of his encounters with a unique woman. Libby writes "I can't remember when I first met Maggie. She blended in with the sand and surf. You could see her walking along the shore in white tennis shoes, floppy straw hat, and oversized print dress. She always carried a crumbled brown paper bag that matched the texture and color of her skin. I remember her most vividly at daybreak or in the evening when I went out jogging, but I later discovered that her walks were regulated by the tides, not by the sun or the clock. She came out at low tide when the beach was wide and smooth."

"Maggie always walked with her head down. She would stop every now and then and pick something up, examine it, and either discard it or put it in the brown sack. I assumed she was collecting shells. We had a nodding and then a grunting acquaintance for many months before I ventured to ask her what kind of shells she was after."

"Not shells at all,' she retorted...'Glass.' She threw away a green pebble that had once been a Ballantine beer bottle. 'Sharp glass. Cuts the feet. Surfers land on it. It sure ruins their summer.'" The woman had a simple mission – to ensure that others who came to enjoy this beach would be safe from the hazards of sharp glass. Who can guess the countless number of people that were impacted by her selfless generosity. Her path in life involved thinking about the welfare of strangers. And she made that part of her daily routine.

Each one of us has a path in life. And on this particular day, as on many Sundays, our paths have crossed. We all have ended up here in this place, together. Why do we come to First Presbyterian Church? Sometimes it's out of habit. Sometimes out of obligation. But oftentimes we come to this place hoping for a unique encounter with God – to experience an epiphany.

The God who sent Jesus Christ into the world made an impression on those wise fellows from the East. Will that same God make an impression on us? Will we leave from this place and simply go back to the mundane routine of our lives? Or will we somehow be changed? Will we learn something new, experience an "aha" moment, even if it's just a tiny one? Will our coming here today make a difference in the path of our life? What if the new path before us seems scary or uncertain? Will we grasp onto the familiar out of fear? Will we reach out for the comfortable path – the one of worldly conformity and the status quo? Or will we travel home by a different road?

In her book, *Listening for God*, Renita Weems describes the people of Israel during the time of the Exodus. They are complaining to Moses, because their lives are uncertain following their release from the Egyptians, and they fear the vastness of the desert and the journey before them. The author imagines a conversation between Moses and God. She writes, "(Moses) whispers under his breath his own anguished prayer to God for direction. And then comes a voice ringing above the noise, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the people to go forward.'"

The writer continues – "You can be sure that wherever the right place, the appointed place, is, it is *forward*, one step ahead, where you can't see, out in the deep water. There. See? Of course not. You won't see until you go." (page 121)

We come to this place on Sundays for an encounter with the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. And oftentimes those encounters will point us in a new direction, or at least will clarify the path upon which we travel. Notice that the magi didn't travel alone. They went as a group. They followed the star, not really sure where it would take them, but confident they were going in the right direction. They were willing to stop along the way, to make sure they hadn't strayed. And when God told them to change course, they were willing to do so.

Our Christian journey is also a group journey. We come to this place to learn and grow together. To inspire one another and to seek out the divine presence. Like the Magi, we too are looking for Jesus. And like their experience, once we encounter him, we'll never be the same.