

## **“Epiphany Sunday” – January 6, 2019 – Matthew 2:1-12**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

Today the short season of Christmas comes to a close and we begin the season of Epiphany. The story associated with this season is, of course, the familiar tale of the wise people who lived in a country far east of Bethlehem, but who, after discerning the course of a new star in the sky, decided to travel west. These wise people were astrologers, interested in the movement of the stars and when they spotted this heavenly light, they believed it to be the signal of the birth of a king. Their curiosity compelled them to load up their camels with expensive gifts and embark on a journey that would change their lives. It is a good story for the start of a new year.

The New Year is about new beginnings. It is a time when many people think about the ways they would like to make changes in how they live their lives. Oftentimes these changes center around diet and exercise, or a goal of reducing the amount of clutter – both physical and emotional – that they currently possess. It may include a resolution to save more for the future, or to spend more quality time with friends and family. The start of a new year gives us an opportunity to make positive changes in our lives. Not that we can’t do these things at other times of the year, but something about the movement forward of the calendar encourages us to take a close look at where we have been previously and consider where we want to go in the future.

We know, through previous failures, that big changes or abrupt shifts in how we live are not always sustainable. Habits are ingrained in us. Back in Indiana, when I was a regular member of the local YMCA, we used to make observations about all the new people who came in January, due to their New Year’s resolutions. The ones who tried to do too much, too soon were often gone by February. But those who took small steps in addressing their physical health concerns tended to be more successful. That realization in itself is an epiphany. We chuckle at the familiar joke that asks – how does one go about eating an elephant. The answer is, one bite at a time. But we laugh, because we recognize the truth in it. Small changes in our daily habits are much more effective for us to reach our future goals.

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. They were experts in the occult, skilled in astrology and dream interpretation. Thus when these gentile astrologers saw a sign in the sky they were intrigued.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, looking for a newly born heir to the throne, it is not surprising that word of their inquiries eventually reached Herod. King Herod was a suspicious and paranoid man. 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 – who indicated that Bethlehem would be the likely location. Herod sent the magi to Bethlehem, just 9 miles south of Jerusalem and told them to return once they had found the child.

Soon the magi arrived at the home of Joseph and Mary, and when they saw the baby, 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. What we do along the way makes a difference. The message of Epiphany charges us to examine how we live in the everyday ordinariness. What principles govern our actions?

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.