**Epiphany**

**January 7, 2017**

**“Following the Light” (Matthew 2:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *Putting out the Wise Men***

I grew up near Owen Sound in a place called Woodford. The road that I lived on was called *the Irish Block Road.* The story was that when the area was first settled, the powers-that-be kept the peace between the various settlers by putting the Irish here and putting the Scots over there. The ethnic composition of this area was largely the same when my parents purchased their farm there. So, I grew up surrounded by Irish Catholics. Our next-door neighbors, the Godfreys, were good friends, and when they retired from farming, they sold their land to my family and kept their house and few acres for a yard and a garden. Quite often when we did our morning chores on the property, my Dad and I would pop in and say hello. One Christmas we were visiting and I noticed that Mrs. Godfrey had not put out the wise men in her nativity scene. When I pointed this out to her, she remarked that the wise men don’t get put out until after Christmas. For years I puzzled over this, always thinking that the wise men should be part of the creche scene all through Christmas. Now I realize that Catholics, and other Christians who follow the calendar of the liturgical year, celebrate the arrival of the wise men or the magi on *Epiphany*, a Christian feast day, which comes after Christmas.

*Epiphany* gets its name from the Greek word (επιφανεια) which means *manifestation* or *appearance,* so it celebrates the revelation or the manifestation of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In Western Christianity, the story of the visit of the magi to the Christ child is recalled, which marks the moment when Jesus was revealed to the Gentiles (non-Jews). Epiphany, then, retells the story of these foreign sages who followed God’s sign, were instructed by the Scriptures, gazed upon God’s son and worshipped him. Its message is that this heavenly Child belongs to the whole world. Hence, there is a strong missional focus to Epiphany, challenging us to see the world beyond our doors, outside the walls of our church. For instance, the rector of an Anglican church where I once gave a series of talks told me that at Epiphany, he rearranges the chairs in the sanctuary to face toward the doors to remind his congregation that they are called to go out into the world. Let us, then, revisit the story of the magi and reflect upon its implications for the ministry and mission of Donway.

**2. The Visit of the Magi**

Matthew chapter two begins by setting the stage, indicating the time, the place and the main characters of the story that will follow. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem” (2:1). While all the details are important, we should not miss the significance of Matthew’s remark on the birthplace of Jesus. *Bethlehem* was the ancestral home of David, so Jesus, the “son of David,” fulfills the messianic expectations for a Davidic king, “who will shepherd my people Israel” (2:6). King Herod, the magi and Jesus are the important characters in this part of the birth narrative. However, it’s the “wise men/magi from the east” who really get the story rolling. Matthew’s description of the wise men, or the lack thereof, however, leaves a lot of unanswered questions - “Who were these “wise men?”, “How many of them were there?”, “Where exactly did they come from?” and “What were their names?” Yet, all we can really ascertain from Matthew’s description is that they were star-gazers from the east. A more fruitful approach may be to ask, what do they represent? For Matthew, these “wise men” or “magi” were non-Jews or Gentiles who had travelled from distant lands to worship or pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews. Again, the Gospel writer is mindful of the diversity within the early church by emphasizing that Jesus was for everyone, both Jew and Gentile. This Gospel story would have been meaning for the early church in its struggle to maintain the unity between two, very different groups of people – Jews and Gentiles.

Matthew moves on to give the backstory and the motivation for magi’s actions in a series of statements, which they made upon arrival in Jerusalem. They were seeking the newborn “king of the Jews” (2:2). Their quest for the king of the Jews in Jerusalem was the result of their observation of a rising star and their subsequent interpretation of its importance. They knew that the king of the Jews had been born and they journeyed to Jerusalem “to worship” or “to pay homage to” him (2:2). The magi displayed a perceptivity and an openness to God. God gave them a sign in the heavens, a star, and they discerned enough from that to go to Jerusalem and to seek the newborn “king of the Jews.” While they needed more information before reaching their goal, they exhibited the heart of one who is seeking God. This becomes an instructive lesson for us as we interact with people who are earnestly searching for God. Folks who are searching may have experienced something that sparks a quest for God. They will, no doubt, have lots of questions, which we need to listen and respond to with acceptance, patience and love. Yet ultimately, our task is to point them to Jesus so that they may worship him. But we are not alone in this undertaking as God continues to guide and direct the way through his Word.

In contrast to the magi, some other characters in the story were not as excited about the news of the newborn king of the Jews. Herod the Great, along with all Jerusalem, were “deeply disturbed” or “frightened” (2:3). Matthew uses this same verb in 14:26 to describe the disciples’ terror when they observed Jesus walking on the water. King Herod and the people of Jerusalem reacted with terror at the news of a newborn king of the Jews. When Herod the Great heard the magi’s question, he threatened by the possibility of a rival to his throne, so he hatched a plan to get rid of this threat. After getting more information about the exact birthplace of the Messiah, he sent the magi to Bethlehem to search for the child (2:7-8). Herod was attempting to manipulate the magi’s faithful quest to suit his own horrible scheme, even pretending to share their desire “to worship” the newborn king (2:8). Herod, the King of Jews, responded to the Messiah’s coming with fear, deception and hostility. With the pretense of wanting to worship the king, his true intent was murder.

Somewhere in between the enthusiasm of the magi and the hostility of Herod, was the indifference of the religious leadership. The “leading priests” and the “teachers of religious law” were summoned by Herod to gain information about the Messiah (2:4). Herod asked them, “Where is the Messiah or Christ to be born?” and they replied, “In Bethlehem,” citing Old Testament passages from Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2.

“And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah,  
    are not least among the ruling cities of Judah,  
for a ruler will come from you  
    who will be the shepherd for my people Israel” (2:6).

The Micah text speaks of a ruler of Israel who would be born in Bethlehem and the 2 Samuel passage refers to a Davidic king who would shepherd the people of Israel. The irony here is so subtle that its easy to miss. The religious leaders of Israel knew the Scriptures because, unlike the magi, they had this special revelation from God. Yet they did nothing except cite Scripture and exit from the story. Those who have the Scriptures and can plainly see what the prophets said are not willing to worship the new born king. It is the magi, the outsiders, the Gentiles, who took this information and acted on it; they go to Bethlehem and worship the Christ child. In her reflections on Epiphany and on the story of the magi, Joan Chittister writes, “The world recognizes the heavenly in this tiny Child. And the Child recognizes the people of God in them. This is not a Christian child only; this Child belongs to the world” (*The Liturgical Year,* p. 93).

**3. Our Response: *Kneeling in Bethlehem***

The challenge of Epiphany is to recognize that the Christ child belongs to the world. The world outside these doors can be a frightening and challenging place, but “In this Child’s light we all walk safely through the unknown” (Chittister, *Liturgical Year,* p. 94). The story of the magi from the East teaches us that God’s mission is not limited what goes on inside these walls. The magi, representing outsiders, received God’s revelation about the Messiah through nature, a star in the heavens. They came to Jerusalem and were further instructed about the Messiah through the Scriptures. On the way to Bethlehem, God’s starlight reappeared and directed to them to the exact place where Jesus the Messiah was (2:9-10). When they beheld the Christ child, they knelt down, worshiped him and presented him with their gifts. “We are all here with the Magi, full of gifts to give on his behalf” (Chittister, *Liturgical Year,* p. 94).

On Christmas Eve we experienced a lovely moment in the service as the children and young people of the church processed up the aisle with candles. Led by the light they placed their candles on the Table and knelt on the stairs. They enacted for us the journey that we must all take to follow the light to Christ, place our gifts before him and kneel in worship. As they walked the aisle, the hymn *In the Bleak Mid-Winter* was playing. Its lyrics are from a poem by Christina Rossetti and I’d like to read it.

***A Christmas Carol***

In the bleak mid-winter

   Frosty wind made moan,

Earth stood hard as iron,

   Water like a stone;

Snow had fallen, snow on snow,

   Snow on snow,

In the bleak mid-winter

   Long ago.

Our God, Heaven cannot hold Him

   Nor earth sustain;

Heaven and earth shall flee away

   When He comes to reign:

In the bleak midwinter

   A stable-place sufficed

The Lord God Almighty

   Jesus Christ.

Enough for Him, whom cherubim

   Worship night and day,

A breastful of milk

   And a mangerful of hay;

Enough for Him, whom angels

   Fall down before,

The ox and ass and camel

   Which adore.

Angels and archangels

   May have gathered there,

Cherubim and seraphim

   Thronged the air;

But only His mother

   In her maiden bliss

Worshipped the Beloved

   With a kiss.

What can I give Him,

   Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd

   I would bring a lamb,

If I were a Wise Man

   I would do my part,—

Yet what I can I give Him,

   Give my heart.

But now, we must ask ourselves: How do we in our circumstances give Jesus our heart? What intentions and plans might it involve? What decisions might we make? What actions might we take? Good question not just at Christmas time but on every day.