**Epiphany**

**January 6, 2019**

**“A Light to the Nations” (Matthew 2:1-12)**

**1. Introduction: *Putting Away the Decorations***

Every year the inevitable happens, Christmas comes to an end and the decorations are taken down, put in boxes and packed away until next December. Next Saturday, we’ll gather in our church to de-green the sanctuary and all these Christmas decorations will be put away in storage until next Advent. Now I know that we need to move on and that the Christmas season must end, but it fills me with a bit of sadness as I pack up all the stuff of Christmas. The lights, the music, the feasting, and the celebrations cease, only to be replaced by the cold, dark, and dreary winter days and nights. This poem by Ann Weems nicely articulates what I’m trying to express here.

Later

Later

after the angels

after the stable

after the Child,

they went back . . .

as we always must,

back to the world that doesn’t understand

our talk of angels and stars

and especially not the Child.

We go back complaining that it doesn’t last.

They went back singing praises to God!

We do have to go back,

But we can still sing the alleluias.

(*Kneeling in Bethlehem,* p. 86)

As we move on from the season of Advent and Christmas, let’s remember that this season of light doesn’t really end because John’s Gospel assures us that Christ, the Word made flesh, continues to bring his life-giving light to the world.

“Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it” (John 1:4-5).

So, even though we need to take down our Christmas lights, there is a Light that never goes out. The light of Christ guides us, giving us hope and life as we navigate the dark days ahead.

In the calendar of the church year, today is *Epiphany,* the holy day that marks the end of the Christmas season. *Epiphany* gets its name from the Greek word *epiphaneia* (επιφανεια), which means *manifestation* or *appearance,* so it marks 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 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 for the story, indicating the time, the place and the main characters of the narrative. “*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 the Davidic king. He would be the one to shepherd God’s people (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” or “the magi from the east” who really get the story rolling. Matthew’s description of the wise men, or the lack thereof, 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. The magi, then, represent outsiders to the faith who seek Jesus because God used natural revelation to communicate to them. They had enough information to get them to Jerusalem to look for the newborn King of the Jews, but they required further revelation from the Scriptures to complete their journey to Jesus.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, the magi inquired about the whereabouts of the newborn King, stating that their quest for him was initiated by the appearance of a star. The motivation for their arduous journey was to worship or to pay homage to this newborn king (2:2). The magi, then, were exemplary seekers. They displayed perceptivity and openness to God, to which he responded by giving them a sign in the heavens, a star. They discerned enough from that to go to Jerusalem and to seek the newborn King.

In contrast to the magi, the other characters in the story were not so excited about this 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 magi’s words. Herod was threatened by anyone using his royal title and possibly usurping his throne. In order to secure his position, he hatched a plan to get rid of this rival. After getting more information about the exact birthplace of the Messiah, he sent the magi to Bethlehem to search for the child (2:4-8). Herod attempted 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’s birthplace (2:4). In response to his query, they replied, “In Bethlehem,” citing the Holy Scriptures, specifically, Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2. 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 then, withdrew from the scene. It is the magi, the outsiders, who took this information and acted on it.

The magi departed from Jerusalem and made their way to Bethlehem and God’s light guided them once more. For the star that they had seen, the one that prompted their quest, appeared to them again and it guided them to the place where the Christ child was (2:9). When they saw the star, they were filled with *joy*! (2:10), or as the Greek text literally says, “*they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*.” They were exuberant because their quest for the King of Kings had come to its conclusion. They entered the house and when they saw the Christ child they fell down on their knees and worshiped him and gave their gifts to him (2:11).

**3. Our Response: *It is not over***

What lessons do we find within this story of the visit of the magi? How might this Gospel narrative shape our lives and our church? What does Epiphany mean to us?

First, we must take note that the magi were outsiders to the Jewish faith and as such they were the first Gentiles to recognize Jesus for who he was. The Christ child came not only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles as well. For Matthew’s first readers, this story would have spoken to the reality of many Christian gatherings in the first century, comprised of Jews and Gentiles worshiping side-by-side. *Christ is for the whole world*. This is the precious truth that pushes out the door and into the world with the message of God’s love. We know that Christ has made a difference in our lives and so we must communicate the significance of his first Advent within our networks of association through word and deed.

Second, the journey of the magi presents an example of the spiritual journey of many people. A person’s quest for God may be sparked by a number of things. In the case of the magi, it was the revelation of God in nature, a star in the heavens. But they needed more information before reaching their goal, specifically, special revelation from the Scriptures, which directed them to Bethlehem. This becomes an instructive lesson for us as we interact with people who are searching for God. Perhaps they experienced something that sparked a deep interest in God. They will no doubt have lots of questions, which we need to answer with openness, acceptance, patience and love. Yet ultimately, our task is to point them to Jesus so that they may journey to him and worship him.

Third, the story of magi demonstrates that the reaction to the gospel can be *positive* and *negative*. The gospel is good news, but not everyone sees it that way. The magi exemplify a positive response to the proclamation of the gospel. They responded to God’s revelation and earnestly looked for Jesus. When they found him, they worshiped him. Herod responded negatively to the birth of the Messiah. He heard the tidings of his birth and was filled with fear that someone might usurp his power. Feeling threatened, he plotted to get rid of the Christ child. Somewhere in between the exuberance of the magi and the hostility of Herod is the indifference of the religious leaders. Like so many in our world, they know the story, but don’t see how it applies to them on a personal level. This makes me think of Jesus’ words from John’s Gospel.

“This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is” (John 3:19-21).

Jesus, the light of the world provokes different kinds of responses. But we cannot control people’s responses to the light. Ours is the task of shining his light into the world. If that is our mission, then where do we start?

This question makes me think about the Christmas Eve pageant. It was a wonderful example of collaboration that resulted in a beautiful worship service. It was something that started as a seed, a tiny idea that caught on and grew like a snowball rolling down a hill. Ideas were shared, scripts were written, people took charge, actors were recruited, singers rehearsed, costumes were assembled, sets were built, sound technicians flipped dials, lights were dimmed, and lots of prayers were lifted up. So many people stepped up and were involved that I forgot to thank Maxine and Deanne for their hard work. But as each participant offered their gifts to God, we were all able to fall on our knees and worship Christ. So, what now? How can we take this example of congregational collaboration and involvement and do more kingdom work?

Remember the Christmas Eve pageant started as a tiny seed, an idea that grew. The mission tree down the hall is a place for each one of us to plant our seed ideas. Together as a congregation we need to listen to the voice of God in each other. So, I encourage, beseech and ask everyone to get a sticky note and write down an idea for a ministry, a mission or a service that our church could do. Please, don’t hold back, we really want to hear your voice, the voice of God’s people so that we might discern the leading of God as a congregation.

I’d like to end as I began, with a poem by Ann Weems. This one is entitled, *It Is Not Over.*

It is not over,

this birthing.

There are always newer skies

into which

God can throw stars.

When we begin to think

that we can predict the Advent of God,

that we can box the Christ

in a stable in Bethlehem,

that’s just the time

that God will be born

in a place we can’t imagine or won’t believe.

Those who wait for God

Watch with their hearts and not their eyes,

listening

always listening

for angels words.

(*Kneeling in Bethlehem,* p. 85).

Who knows where God is leading us this year? May we have ears to hear God’s voice, hearts to respond to his calling, the courage to follow his guidance, and the unity of his Spirit as we work together.