

SERMON – EPIPHANY, 2021 (Matthew 2:1-12)

“Seeking God’s light”

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, we have sung our way through the past few weeks as we celebrated the Advent season, Christmas and now Epiphany. We started with “Come, o come Emmanuel,” then “Hark the herald angels sing,” followed by “Away in a manger,” and the traditional song for today is “We three kings of Orient are.”

At Epiphany, we celebrate the revelation of God incarnate as Jesus Christ, manifested in that “Aha” moment when the Magi, who had journeyed from the east, discovered at the end of their quest, not a prince born in a palace but the infant Jesus born in a stable.

The Magi had watched the heavens for signs of momentous earthly events. They were not really astronomers who studied the stars and planets for scientific data, but were astrologers like the people in our time who cast horoscopes.

In their time in history, there was an air of expectation that something critical and significant was about to happen. For example, around 40 BC, soon after the end of the civil war that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar, the poet Virgil published an allegorical poem about the imminent expectation of a hero sent from heaven whose birth would inaugurate a new golden age of peace and stability. Two Roman historians from a later period, Tacitus and Suetonius, they wrote of the expectation of a world leader to arise out of the backwater province of Judea.

It was also a common belief in ancient times that a sign in the heavens would accompany such a momentous event, and several impressive astronomical signs were seen in the years prior to Jesus’ birth, a date which scholars have calculated to have happened between 6 and 4 BC. Halley’s comet had made its circuit around the earth in 12BC, and the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn happened three times in 7BC.

Interestingly, such a planetary conjunction happened two weeks ago, just before Christmas. And of course, the media called the event the Christmas star. For ancient astrologers, Jupiter signified a king while Saturn was associated with the Jewish people. This would have been fuel to drive Herod's insecurity, as well as local political and religious speculation.

And finally, in 5BC, a bright light suddenly appeared in the night sky, a light that was even seen as far away as in China and recorded by the ancient astronomers there. Modern astronomers think that it may have been a supernova originating in the Andromeda galaxy.

What all this tells us is that, independent of the Bible, we can read of a relatively common expectation around two millennia ago that momentous change was coming. And that the change was expected to be accompanied by signs in the heavens.

The Judeo-Christian tradition has always taught that God can be known through creation. However, the knowledge we gain of God through creation alone is incomplete, and sometimes can be confusing. We come to see that although one can know of God through creation, we do not come to know God in fullness through creation alone.

In theological terms, what we are discussing is revelation. Unless God chooses to reveal his own self to us, we would know nothing of him. But because God decided to be made known, we can, and do, learn of God through the general revelation of creation, and through forms of specific revelation. Just as we can discern something of the artist through her painting or his sculpture, we can learn something of God through creation. John Polkinghorne is a theoretical physicist, and he is also an Anglican priest and theologian, and he expressed the point this way:

“We are so familiar with the fact that we can understand the world that most of the time we take it for granted. It is what makes science possible. Yet it could have been otherwise. The universe might have been a disorderly chaos rather than an orderly cosmos. Or it might have had rationality which was inaccessible to us.”

The universe was created with an order that humans can study and somewhat comprehend. We were created with the ability to understand, and a common component of human self-understanding through the ages and around the world has been a belief in God. This belief in something greater than ourselves is such a universal human experience that many find that awareness of God alone to be proof of God's existence. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we could admit that this universal human idea of God could be nothing more than a universal projection of our minds to fill a need in our lives. This was the Marxist world view that religion is the opiate of the masses, that we just delude ourselves into belief.

Yet, the idea of revelation comes circling back around to tap us on our shoulders. We do not know of God simply because we want there to be a God. We know of God because God reveals his own self to us. Again, addition to the general revelation of God through creation, there is specific revelation. It is more direct and can include dreams and visions that God uses to get people's attention. Dreams like the one which told Joseph of Jesus' origin. Dreams like the one which warned the Magi to return home without stopping to pay a courtesy call on Herod. Dreams like the one that warned Joseph to flee to Egypt with the child and his mother.

And specific revelation also includes scripture. God's revelation is available to us through the word of God. We get a fuller picture of God through scripture that complements rather than contradicts the image of God that we attain through creation.

And another important form of specific revelation comes through our own lives. We know God through the ways in which God acts in our lives, and the ways in which God has acted in human history. And as God is revealed in the way he acts in history, the Christian concept of revelation reaches its fullest expression in the person of Jesus. We get our best and clearest image of who God is, and how God acts, through the life and ministry, and death and resurrection of Jesus.

As the apostle Paul wrote, “For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Whether they understood it at the outset, at the very beginning of their journey, or not, the Magi travelled to see the light of the glory of God revealed in the face of the infant Jesus.

The Magi were seekers even if their methods were unbiblical, and perhaps antibiblical since astrology was a forbidden means of divination for the Jews. Yet God honoured their quest. God called out to the Magi from the heavens, or they would never have found Jesus. God, not the Magi, initiated their quest. God guided them to their destination as the Magi never knew exactly where their journey would take them. Yet, they played their part as they did not simply stay at home admiring the star in the sky. They hit the road, enduring all the troubles of travel including having to go against the local king Herod. Yet all of their actions came second. God initiated the journey.

We may think we are spiritual seekers, that we are the ones on a quest for God’s presence. But that’s not the way scripture presents the story. Scripture tells that God is the seeker. God is revealing his own self to us in creation, in scripture, in our very life experience. We are asked only to open our eyes to see, and then to respond as the Magi did in coming to adore the one who made us and, who then entered human history to redeem us.

Open your eyes to how God is showing up in your life. God is seeking after you and after me. Come let us adore him. Let us worship him.

From the gospel text, we know that when the Magi found the child with his mother, they worshipped him. The word that gets translated as “worship” is a wonderful combination of the Greek words for “to fall down” and “to kiss.” This is homage, this is sincere and pure heartfelt worship. They found the child who was the goal of their journey and they fell down in praise and adoration. In a way, the Magi represented the Gentiles coming to pay homage and bringing gifts to the Messiah, as was read to us from Psalm 72.

And they offered the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. There is a tradition surrounding the meaning of these gifts. They offered gold because the baby is a king, just as they told Herod and his entourage that they were looking for the child who was born the king of the Jews.

They offered the baby frankincense because he is God, and the incense symbolizes prayer rising to the heavens like smoke. And they offered the baby myrrh which was often used for burials and symbolized death, because even here, at the very beginning of the gospel story about Jesus as a baby, we remember that this story goes to the cross and beyond.

We are all on our own journeys through the dark, carrying our own gifts within us. We are seeking to find the truth of love in this world of darkness. We too bear our gifts and are seeking the right place to lay them down.

We come bearing gold, our gift to our king. But to whom and to what do we owe our allegiance? Who is our king? What orients our lives in the political spectrum, and how do we work together? There are any number of authorities who would eagerly have our obedience and fealty. How do we know which loud voice in the clamour of the world should be obeyed?

We come bearing frankincense and seeking what is holy in this world. We look for the thin space, the gap between this world that we see and touch, and the other world that we long for and know to be true. Is it our selves, our families, our nations? Is it our ideologies, our own opinions? Is it personal growth? Is there anything that makes you fall on your knees in honour of something greater than yourself?

We come bearing myrrh as we mourn. We are all bearing some sort of grief in this world, and we are looking for a place to lay it down. What is it that makes you weep? What do you do with grief in your life? Myrrh was used for the anointing of a dead body. What are you ready to bury? What do you need to let go and mourn the loss of?

Whom do we obey? Whom or what do we worship? Where can we lay our broken hearts? The answer is the Kingdom of Love that Jesus preached about. This new kingdom is the light that illuminates the deep darkness that today's Isaiah passage refers to. This new kingdom has broken into, and shattered all we thought we knew about the way the world works.

If we obey the Kingdom of Love, we will find ourselves overflowing with compassion, and forgiving our enemies, and giving away all we had thought was "ours." If we worship in the Kingdom of Love, we find ourselves falling down at the feet of Love, and joining with angels and archangels and breaking bread with God's beloved. If we allow the Kingdom of Love to break our hearts, we will realize that all the world's children are our children, and that the heart of God is overflowing with gracious compassion for everyone.

It might sound like loss – the loss of being the center, the loss of "treasure." But in this loss there is overwhelming joy. That was the case with the Magi, for in their encounter with the infant Jesus who is the incarnation of Love, they were overwhelmed with joy.

In the dark world two thousand years ago, there was something so bright and beautiful that it drew the Magi. In our world that seems so dark as well, especially after the tumultuous year of 2020, there is still something so bright and beautiful that it draws us as well. This is what we look for in the dark, burdened by our treasure, longing to lay down our obedience, our worship, even our grief.

And so we walk through the dark, our eyes seeing a speck of light, a star we can follow. That is what Epiphany is about. It is a time to look for the light of God shining in expected and in unexpected places. And it is a time to worship, to fall down and kiss the light when we do find it.

Amen.