

010613 Epiphany Sunday

“By Any Other Road” -- Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Isaiah 60:1-9; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Today, we celebrate Epiphany. ‘*Epiphany*’ means, simply, a deep revelation about something, a fuller understanding than you had before. Often, an ‘epiphany’ is mind-expanding and eye-opening. What you thought before is altered and transformed by the new understanding from the epiphany you have had. Today, the celebration of *Epiphany* means the revelation to the world of the great mystery of the birth of Jesus Christ, the unity of God and human together in the person of Jesus. The vast and worldly meaning of this epiphany is encapsulated in the story of the wise men from the East in Matthew’s account.

We are dealing today with spiritual mysteries. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians:

5In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6that is, the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

The mystery of the revelation of the Holy Spirit to the mystery that had not been made known to humankind is now expanded into an even greater, more personal mystery - the inclusion of the entire world in the promises of God through the hearing and believing of the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is a clue to the nature of a spiritual epiphany: *when the sign or answer you receive in your spiritual journey creates more questions than you had before, you are probably following a path that leads more deeply into a relationship with God and Jesus Christ.*

The epiphany becomes a road to greater revelation. The insights you receive into the depths and nature of God lead to even deeper understandings and insights. We are led by a more loving, more compassionate light into a loving, compassionate God. Isaiah puts it like this:

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

...

Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.

*Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the **wealth of the nations** shall come to you.*

We know more because of the light God has shed upon the world, but now there are also better questions about how we live in that light.

The mystery, then, inspires the journey. The journey leads to revelation and epiphany. Epiphany transforms the road, the journey, so that upon our return to where we started, everything has changed. The *magi*... (how many does Scripture tell us there are? what realms are they kings over? what are their names?) are presented to us as people who seek knowledge. They study, learn and seek. The most likely translation for the word *magi* would be *astrologer*, who is a person who looks for signs among the stars and the heavens. Back in the day, an astrologer would have been very wise, indeed, because astrologers

were trained in sciences and philosophy and religious ways. Most importantly, for the purposes of the story of Jesus Christ and for us, the *magi* were *Askers of Questions*. They were seekers for a deeper truth, a more complete understanding of the mysteries of the world and the heavens.

It is important to recognize some aspects of the Magi and how they relate to us. These are men of knowledge and seekers of knowledge, just as many of us in this room are. The Magi go one step further as seekers. Many of us are satisfied with just seeking. The Magi, however, act quickly on the signs they have seen. The journey toward truth requires making choices for the truth when we see those options open up before us. But like all of us, the Magi are heavily influenced by the structures of society and tradition. We must respect and even value those things, but we must also recognize how they influence our thinking.

The Magi are influenced heavily by what I call ‘empire thinking’. They don’t question the commands of kings and rulers. They don’t suspect devious intent in palaces. They are not mistrustful of government leaders and officials like we are. They follow all the rules and customs. They are not mindful of the outcomes of such behavior. The reason I say this is because the Magi are very public in their asking about of the “child who is born the king of the Jews”. They visit secretly with Herod and tell him everything he wishes to know. The actions of the Magi have, as a collateral outcome, a direct influence on Herod’s decision to massacre the innocents.

The Magi are seekers of truth, however, and after meeting the Christ Child, they realize Jesus is the greater truth compared to the rulership of Herod or any other earthly authority. They return home to the East by any other road than the one which brought them to Christ. Their way of doing things, their mindsets and influences are radically altered by their encounter with the Savior of the world. Perhaps they saw the startling contrasts Matthew wishes us to see:

The King Herod, appointed by Rome and approved by the religious authorities, in his palace is set against a child born of poor parents in a small house in a poor town in Israel.

A king who indiscriminately kills innocents is set against a man who is appointed the Son of God who heals and makes the guilty innocent by his word alone.

The worldly wisdom of political intrigue required to rule a colonized nation is countered by the folly of love pronounced by a man who speaks in riddles and parables and universal statements.

The “empire mindset”, the ruling value system, is always antithetical to the epiphany of God. Prophecy, revelation and spiritual truth are always unsettling and disruptive of worldly ways. This is because, as we said earlier, an epiphany makes us ask more, deeper and better questions about the truth we are seeking. Empires do not like questions and they do not like the light of truth. This is why the Magi *must* speak with Herod. In order to meet and live with Christ, we must also meet and understand the empire mindset we are influenced by currently.

The journey is a long one. If, however, our journey is determined to discover truth, we will set out on that journey. The Magi came from the east. Some say they came from Persia, perhaps as far as Saudi Arabia or even further east. According to legend, Marco Polo, in his explorations of the middle and far east, found the village from which the Magi came. There, in that village, it was said that there were in fact three Magi - a young one, a middle-aged one and an elder one. All of them made the journey to find Christ. On the journey, the young one discovered a young Christ, the middle-aged one discovered a mature Christ and the elder Magi discovered an elder companion in Christ. It is a telling story because it suggests a deep spiritual truth: we think we are the ones going out to find God and Christ, but in fact it is Christ who finds us at exactly the place of our deepest need and hope, whatever the place in our lives. It is not important the distance we have come on our journey. It does not matter where our journey began. It

does not matter the passage of time it has taken to get to this point.

But we must be open to being met, and that is the value of the road taken to God. The decision to take the journey is itself a sign we are open to the epiphany, the mystery of Jesus Christ. We need to recognize that, at any point along the journey, we can succumb to an 'empire mindset', a mindset that closes off the goal of an epiphany, which is to reveal to us a deeper mystery, a mystery which creates more questions than we had before. An empire mindset closes down avenues of questions, seeks to end the journey and tells you all your questions have been answered.

To allow ourselves some time with the Magi, however, means we allow Christ to change the direction of our lives. We were on a particular path before we met him in the house.

Is it Jesus who is young and innocent when we first meet him, or is it us who are young and innocent in the ways of God?

Have we come from far away, or has God taken up the space in between and met us where we are?

Has the world been transformed by our meeting the Messiah, or have we simply seen a deeper truth that was already present?

We journey to a mystery when we visit the Christ child, a revelation of God. Paul says in Colossians:

25I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, 26the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. 27To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We receive the gifts of Christ, just as Mary and Jesus receive the gifts of the Magi. We are visited by a revelation from God in the presence of Christ, just as the Magi are led by a star to Bethlehem. Our world is changed by the mysteries of God, which is, as Paul says, *Christ in you all*. This changes the direction of our journey. We have no other choice but to take another way home, as the Magi must after their visit. They, and we, must take a new way in order to be among our culture, our government and entertainment, our families. We must take any other road than the one that got us here; 'here' meaning '*witness to the transforming power of Jesus Christ*'.

When we are seeking God, the journey appears one way. Our influences have not been transformed and the scales have not fallen from our eyes. The star of truth brings us to the brink of change. WB Yeats puts it this way in his poem, *The Magi*:

*Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones
Appear and disappear in the blue depths of the sky
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.*

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poem/2095>

But the road, the journey changes us. The mystery changes us. The Magi are deliberate, persistent and methodical in their study, the journey they take and the questions they ask. They are a good model for us to follow in our journey with Jesus Christ as our guide and star. When we take the new road, the road away from all those things which consumed and influenced our thinking before, everything changes. Even death itself. TS Eliot ends his poem *The Journey of the Magi* with these words:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

http://allpoetry.com/poem/8453741-The_Journey_Of_The_Magi-by-T_S_Eliot

The reason Eliot ends his poem like this is because he knows that, upon meeting Jesus Christ, the *other death* we should be glad of is the death of the former self and our birth into a new life with Christ. In this new year, let us with the Magi take the other road, the road of new birth, transformation and life. Amen.