

Prelude

Welcome

***Opening Hymn** *We Three Kings of Orient Are* **185**

***Call to Worship from Psalm 72**

Leader: Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

People: May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

Leader: May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all the generations.

People: May there be abundance of grain in the land; may it wave on the top of the mountains; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may people blossom in the cities like the grass in the field.

Unison: May his name endure forever, his fame continue as long as the sun. May all the nations be blessed in him; may they pronounce him happy. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth.

***Unison Prayer (from Terri @ RevGalBlogPals.blogspot.com – accessed 12/28/10)**

Bright Star, Holy One, hear our prayer. Bright Star, Holy One, Be with those who suffer, struggle, cry out, weep, are in pain of heart or soul or mind. From the darkness may the glory of God arise!

Bright Star, Holy One, lead our leaders in your way, your hope, your love and your peace. Enlighten our pathways with the glory of God, arise!

Bright Star, Holy One, laugh with those who laugh this day. Lift up our joys. Our hope is found in you. May the Glory of God arise.

Bright Star, Holy One, help us in all we do and say and are to be your love shining forth – may the glory of God arise.

Bright Star, Holy One, hear our prayer. Amen.

***Gloria Patri**

Announcements

**Offertory
Doxology & Prayer of Dedication**

Sharing our Joys and Concerns

**Call to Prayer and Response
Pastoral Prayer**

*Holy God, you gather the whole universe
into your radiant presence
and continually reveal your Son as our Savior.
Bring healing to all wounds,
make whole all that is broken,
speak truth to all illusion,
and shed light in every darkness,
that all creation will see your glory and know your Christ.*

On this day we pray for:

DEATHS

HEALTH

WORLD

JOYS

Bdays

Anniv

....

O Lord, who makes the created world and all the moments of our lives, protect us in the coming year.

O Christ, who embodies the love of God, be our companion now and forever.

O Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things, be our hope and promise in all we do and all our relationships. We pray as Jesus taught us...

Our Lord's Prayer

Hebrew Testament Reading: Isaiah 60:1-9

Moment of Music

Gospel Reading: Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon: “Strange Attractors” Rev Seth D Jones

This week, we celebrate Epiphany. ‘*Epiphany*’ means a deep revelation about something, a fuller understanding than you had before. Often, an ‘epiphany’ is mind-expanding and eye-opening, triggered by an extraordinary event. After an epiphany, what you understood before is altered and transformed by the epiphany you have had. The celebration of *Epiphany* is the recognition of the revelation to the world of the great mystery of the birth of Jesus Christ. The Magi are responding to an Epiphany that leads them to the child Jesus.

Epiphanies are most often dealing with spiritual mysteries.

Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians:

5In former generations this mystery (of Jesus) 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 revelation and illumination of the Holy Spirit is expanding into an even greater, more personal mystery - the inclusion of the entire world in the promises of God through the hearing of the Good News of Jesus Christ, even in far-away lands where Magi live. We know we are in the presence of a spiritual epiphany *when the sign or answer you receive in your spiritual journey creates more questions than you had before. If so, you are likely following an epiphany that leads more deeply into a relationship with God and Jesus Christ.*

The epiphany is a road to greater revelation. Insights received lead into even deeper understandings and insights. We are led by and deeply attracted to a more loving, more compassionate light and 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, the questions, inspire 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* 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 astronomical sciences and philosophy and religious ways. 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.

The Magi are also *gatherers around strange and mysterious things*. They are attracted to *strange attractors*. Strange attractors are mathematical objects that generate systems that behave in unpredictable ways, or chaos systems. Strange attractors create the foundations for things like nebulae in the universe, randomly shaped clouds that are the birthplace of stars. Strange attractors pull in apparently unconnected objects and draw them into unpredictable and untrackable pathways.

The Magi are gatherers around mystery and seekers of knowledge, just as many of us in this room are. The Magi go one step further as seekers. The Magi 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, which are also strange attractors. Civilizations, societies, people are unpredictable. We respect and even value those things, but we must also recognize how those strange attractors influence our thinking.

The Magi are influenced heavily by one strange attractor that 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 unable to predict the outcomes of their attraction to the cultural strange attractor of empire.

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. There are limits to knowledge and the ability to see consequence and outcome. This is also an effect of strange attractors.

The Magi are seekers of truth, regardless, and after meeting the Christ Child, they realize Jesus is the greater strange attractor compared to the rulership of Herod or any other earthly authority. They return home to the East by another 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. They now orbit a new strange attractor.

The “*empire mindset*”, the ruling value system, is always antithetical to the epiphany and strange attractor 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. Empires like answers and rules and the cool secrecy of shadows. This is why the Magi, even though they could not predict the outcome, *must* speak with Herod. In order to meet and live with Christ, we must also meet and understand the empire mindset which influences us. Beneath abhorrent ideas and actions are actual human beings who are either or at the same time agents of chaos and sufferers of chaotic actions.

The journey is a long one. If our journey is determined to discover truth, we will set out on that journey, regardless of distance. We will seek out the strange attractors, wherever they may be. The Magi came from the east. Some say they came from Persia, perhaps as far as Saudi Arabia or even further east, perhaps Outer Mongolia. If the Magi came from Saudi Arabia, it would be about a 30 day journey on foot.

If they came from Outer Mongolia, say from modern day Kyrgyzstan, it would be at least 60 days.

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 there were 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 attracts and draws us, it is God who finds us.

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. Young, middle-aged, or elder - Jesus is looking for each of us.

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 strange attractor of Jesus Christ. We need to recognize that, at any point along the journey, we can become attracted 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 to journey with the Magi, however, means we allow Christ to change the orbit of our lives. We were on a particular path before we met Jesus in the house of Mary and Joseph, orbiting another strange attractor in our lives. Then the gravitation, the soft power and draw of the love of Christ, attracted us into a stranger, stronger orbit.

The questions that arise are profound:

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 where we have come from and where we have arrived, 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 throughout time and now?

We journey to a mystery when we respond to the attraction to the Christ child. 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 and orbit of our journey. We choose the unpredictable orbit around Christ. As my teacher, Dr. Len Sweet says, "*Like the Magi on that first Epiphany, once you've met Jesus, you can't go back the way you came, and life can never be the same.*"

The star and mysterious orbit around the Christ 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 helmets 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, the attraction 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 and follow the strange attractor, the road away from all those things which consumed and influenced our thinking before, everything changes. Even suffering and death. 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

Eliot knows that, upon meeting Jesus Christ, the *another death* we should be glad of is the death of the former self and our birth into a new life with Christ,

letting ourselves orbit this strange attractor that attracts and draws even strangers from away. Amen.

***Closing Hymn:** *O Come, All Ye Faithful* **173**

***Benediction and Congregational Response**

Postlude