

Sunday, January 7, 2018

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

Epiphany: A New Way Forward

Matthew 2:1-12

INTRODUCTION:

The Magi, or Wise Men were quite exotic and mysterious. When they rode into Jerusalem with their large well-armed entourage it was as strange as if these three here today rode down main street at rush hour, their camels surrounded by 100 massive Arabian stallions, ridden by tough looking bodyguards.

We might think the circus was in town but King Herod's well-traveled and worldly advisors immediately recognized that Persian Magi were inside the walls of Jerusalem. They would have known that Magis were powerful Kingmakers in Persia and wielded extraordinary influence and great authority in the East. Arriving unannounced into the city was entirely threatening to everyone who witnessed it, even – and especially - King Herod.

As it turned out the wise sages from the east were looking for something far greater than worldly power. They were searching for the ultimate King of all heaven and earth. They had seen it in a star formation, an anomaly in celestial alignment. This was a holy pilgrimage for a cosmic King. Naturally they thought this kind of royalty would be born in the biggest and best palace in the area. Instead they were pointed to a tiny backwater, no account town fit only for lowly common people.

This is how Matthew records it in chapter 2 of his Gospel.

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to

Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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These three Magi are really quite inspirational. Back in Persia they were hungry to understand how the cosmos fit together. They dreamed of someday seeing that prophesied starlight anomaly that their wise teachers promised would one day appear. Day by day and night by night they carefully studied the skies, they closely observed the patterns of nature and over time deduced more and more of the ancient deep wisdom found in all creation. Then one night, it appeared. Most people wouldn't ever notice it. You had to look carefully and then look again to be sure this was it. You had to know that this little light captivating your interest actually represents something phenomenal and astonishing. For those with eyes to see, this glowing light in the western sky was, in fact, the unmistakable sign of *Shekinah glory*! The dwelling place of God was being revealed!

For those who seek to enter into the divine mysteries and find meaning and purpose in the connection between all things, you have to be present to what is right in front of you. You see - the Magi knew that God hides right in the midst of us. All creation reflects God in some way and Spirit is continually revealed through our physical universe. God is not out there somewhere in the great beyond, no God Dwells Among Us. We, just have to learn to see it. How do you perceive the *Shekinah glory*? Where or when have you seen dwelling place of God? Let us pray...

God of great surprises and ever unfolding revelation, give us eyes to see and ears to hear. Help us to have the courage of the wise men that left everything to follow your light. As we begin to imagine the way ahead, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. AMEN

Have you ever had a moment of illumination when suddenly you see what's been in front of you all along? In my experience, whenever I tell people close to me about an epiphany I've had - some stunning revelation or insight about my journey forward, nearly always it has been painfully obvious to everyone else for a long time. Like when I was in seminary, I did not really know if I was being called specifically to parish ministry. Finally, after about 3 years and a variety of ministerial experiences and internships, I knew that parish ministry was where I should focus my efforts. Everyone in my life reacted to this news as if I told them "I just realized! I AM a tall, white, middle-aged man! Sometimes the road ahead is clear to everyone but you.

I think most of us have epiphanies all the time, sometimes they are magic moments of awed reverence and clarity but more often we simply see the ordinary in a new light. But the problem is that we too easily dismiss these moments as silly fantasies or unattainable dreams too good for us, or the dream fades slowly day by day as other distractions and perceived responsibilities take on primary importance. That distant, shining star that once captured your imagination and compelled your interest so much that it shaped your way forward somehow flattened into the ordinary and everyday.

How is it that some people dream about walking El Camino de Santiago and over time they keep the dream alive and find a way to do it? Maybe you are one of those people who one random day, on your commute into the office, have this inexplicable revelation that your work is meaningless, your soul is in hibernation, and you simply know that you were born for some other purpose, so you change it, not really knowing fully where your going or what the cost will be.

What might inspire YOU to set out on an adventure like that? Is there is a pilgrimage you long to make but keep delaying the start? Maybe the cosmos of your life has suddenly been rearranged and you are compelled by circumstance to make sense of it again by rearranging your direction. Have you ever really seriously thought about what it would take for you to set out on a new way forward, following the star glowing steadily in your own imagination?

The journey of the Magi teaches us to begin by paying close attention to the signs of God's presence in and around our life. It's about jumping head long into a faith that believes in a benevolent GOD, who desires only good for us and in fact is pointing the way forward one step at a time. This is an active faith that beckons us to seek out greater understanding of the mystical truths

that we intuitively perceive as more valuable than certainty, comfort or personal security.

To live into the epiphany is to identify our truest self and sense our deepest desire. To live into the epiphany is awakening to the signs of God's direction for us, then walking that way in humility, openness and perseverance. This is a mystical path that recognizes that we are spiritual beings on a human journey rather than human beings on a spiritual journey. This is the path to wholeness and fulfillment.

This past year, this is exactly what we, as a congregation, have been doing. Our cosmos suddenly shifted in 2016 and we have been working hard to make sense of the new constellations forming in front of us. We have been spiritually discerning God's will for TriCon Church and we have been rewarded with a VISION. We are beginning to see the formation of a star signaling our way forward. The vision we hold is that **God is calling Trinitarian Congregational Church to be a nurturing community of faith that honors God through service and mission.** It stirs the imagination when we think of setting out in that direction with intention. Our potential and possibly begin to take shape. Priorities emerge and we are seeing that there is a new way forward toward greater wholeness and fulfillment. To fully encounter God in flesh appearing, as the Magi did is to be filled with the *Shekinah glory!* And, like the Magi, we behold the radiance of God dwelling among us here today, and from the majestic fullness of God's presence we find ourselves compelled to move outward. Bursting with the love God, we freely and eagerly look to serve others and empty ourselves into the mission - only to find God dwelling there too, fully present among the frailest and most vulnerable, and we are filled up again!

Even in the afterglow of beholding the birth of Christ, born once again in our heart, we are still, very much fully aware that this world still struggles with darkness. A darkness that threatens to swallow up all hope, so now we are called to rise up and joyfully march back into service. God is calling us to shine with the Divine light that is now fully within us. Together we move forward freely offering this Divine healing balm to the ever-breaking world. So let us begin this new way forward right now with our morning offering. May our combined gifts bring relief, comfort and solace in the name and in the Way of Jesus.

Let us freely give and gratefully receive in this mysterious circle of *Shekinah glory!* AMEN.