

Epiphany 2020

Here we are, worshipping for the first time together in 2020 and for the second time during the current Christmas season, having gathered on Dec. 25th and now this morning. It *should* be the third time we worship during the 12 days of Christmas of course, but our service had to be cancelled last Sunday. Which was very sad to me. I was to have the Sunday off, and I totally agree with the need to cancel, but I had put together a lovely service of lessons and carols; Scott and Sharon Shelerud were going to read the lessons, Helene was going to be the worship leader, and everyone was going to get to sing whatever Christmas carols we hadn't sung up to that point. Because I keep a kind of spread sheet, you know-- seriously--to make sure we sing all the hymns I consider significant at least once during any given church year season. I freely admit that probably only matters to one person in a 100, but as it happens, I am that one person, so I was saddened that last Sunday's chance to worship, sing those hymns, hear the nativity story read, all didn't happen. It also left me with a pastoral worship quandary....should I just move that lessons and carols service to today, so we would have that missed opportunity? Or should I go ahead with the Epiphany service I'd already planned, to commemorate the coming of the Magi to worship Christ and kick off the liturgical season of Epiphany that will last from now through the end of February? Given that Christmas is nearly two weeks behind us now, and some of us have already taken down trees and decorations and are moving on, I concluded I'd stick with the original plan of celebrating Epiphany this morning. Because just as I regretted missing Lessons and Carols, I would also have regretted missing celebrating the festival of Epiphany. And while our culture tends to

embrace at least some version of celebrating Christmas, Epiphany generally gets overlooked in the larger cultural sphere. So, if we don't celebrate it here today, we likely won't celebrate it all. Which would be a shame, because the festival of Epiphany and the season which follows it, are significant. The Epiphany season is directly related to Christmas, it's a kind of extension of Christmas in a sense, a season of light and miracles in which heaven is manifested in the things of earth, and divinity is revealed in what might seem ordinary. Even if we take down our Christmas trees and decorations today, the mystery and wonder of the coming of the Christmas Light into Darkness continues on throughout this Epiphany season, which is altogether appropriate.....because although the Winter solstice has come and gone, we still have plenty of darkness and cold ahead, and every reminder of light and wonder in the midst of that is a welcome blessing. So let's reflect for a few moments on this festival of Epiphany and the season it heralds.

The chief revelation for the Epiphany season is the coming of the Magi, which we observe this morning. Who were these magi anyways? Magi is a term for a kind of priestly astronomer, magician, and interpreter of dreams. They may or may not have been actual kings, but they were likely powerful men, of importance and wealth and education.

We like to imagine three of them, because our Biblical text notes that they brought three gifts. However, as we all know, having just been through gift giving ourselves at Christmas, many people give more than one gift, and some give none, and so on. So, we don't know that they were three in number. We do know that they were magi, *plural*, versus, magus, *singular*, though. Or Wise *men*, as our translation reads, rather than wise

man. More than one. Maybe two, maybe three, maybe 6 or 7, who knows? Coming from the exotic east, they may have ridden camels, but we don't know that either. And the text seems to indicate that they found Christ in a house, which would suggest that Mary and Joseph had had time to have moved out of the stable and found more appropriate lodging. In other words, it's not Christmas Eve. Tradition suggests it was 12 days after the birth that the Magi arrived, which is why Epiphany falls on Jan. 6, tomorrow, as already mentioned. Some scholars believe that Mary and Joseph may have temporarily settled in Bethlehem, and that it could be as much as two years later that the magi arrived. All of this, we don't know.

What we do know, though, is that these ancient wise men did in fact follow a star to find a new born king and bring gifts to him and pay him homage. These were astronomers who were at home following the patterns of the stars and journeying by darkness. In fact, the Christmas story is essentially a *dark* story, when you think about it. The Gospel of Luke reveals that the birth took place at night, and blindingly bright angels cleave the darkness of night skies outside of Bethlehem to bring the news to the shepherds there. And here in Matthew, Christ's first foreign visitors must travel by night to find him, so that they may follow the movement of the star. We might ponder briefly a detail we often take for granted, which is the nature of the revelation that guides these magi by night. They didn't know the Hebrew Scriptures. They didn't know Jewish tradition. They were very likely not even monotheists, coming from the eastern lands, perhaps from Persia as they did. The source of their revelation is *solely* a star. Which is to say, that God used nature to reveal Christ to these magi. That raises at least two points.

One is that this divine birth impacts not just humanity, but creation. It's not just about us. The earth and the cosmos are somehow aware of and affected by Christ's birth. The second point raised relates to this first, namely, that God is *revealed* through nature. Many of us powerfully experience God in nature, and no wonder, living where we do. As Phil and I have been hiking and skiing in snow covered forests, I have marveled again and again at the unique beauty of winter. Each season has its beauty, but there is something celestial, something ethereal and crystalline about this season's beauty, that makes it an ideal setting for the celebration of Christmas. God is revealed through nature. The star that guides the magi is a prime example. The beauty of the night sky was their companion on their journey to discover Christ, and we could probably do far worse in our searching for Christ than to spend some time looking up at the dark winter skies.

But the darkness of the birth story encompasses more than the physical darkness of night. There is other darkness in this story, too. For starters, although it's a story about birth, there is foreshadowing of death from the very beginning. We see this in the choice of the gifts of the magi. Of course, we've likely all heard jokes about how if wise women rather than wise men had visited Christ, they'd have brought diapers and formulas and so on. And in truth, the gifts of the Magi were not typical baby gifts. I cannot think of a single baby shower I've attended where anyone gave gold, frankincense or myrrh as a gift. But these are rare and valuable gifts, and there is considerable symbolism attached to each gift. Martin Luther wrote about this symbolism. The gold represented Christ's royalty. Gold is a gift fit for a king, and the magi expected to find a

baby king. It follows that such a birth would take place in a palace, which is why they first go wrong and end up in Herod's palace in Jerusalem. So, to be fair to the magi, their gifts wouldn't have seemed quite so out of place in a palatial setting, and they didn't know when they set out that this king would be peasant born. We can only wonder what Mary and Joseph must have made of these exotic visitors and gifts, and what they might have done with that gold.

If gold symbolized Christ's royalty, then the frankincense symbolized His divinity. Frankincense is a kind of incense, as the name indicates. Incense was used in many ancient cultures, including Judaism, and is still sometimes used today in the Catholic church, as being symbolic of prayers being raised to God. Incense was a strange gift for a baby, but it points to Christ's divinity.

But the myrrh was perhaps the strangest gift, and the darkest gift, in that it was used as a burial spice. To bring this gift of myrrh was almost like giving the gift of a cemetery plot to a newborn. More than a little jarring and out of place, it might seem. But it serves to remind us that this child was born to die. All of us are born to die in a way, I suppose, but in this case, the death would have a redemptive power that would free a world from sin and darkness. This child was uniquely born to die. The dark gift of myrrh foreshadows death to come.

And that darkness in the story is further explored in the human evil we see at work in King Herod. Like so many with worldly power, Herod is greedy, insecure, and dangerous. Too weak to view the birth in any light but that of a potential political rival, he plots to kill Christ before that rivalry can develop. He will later massacre all the

Hebrew boys under 2 years of age in Bethlehem in an effort to kill this new born king. This genocide is referred to as the Slaughter of the Innocents and it's one of the grimmer examples of human evil. This earthly king has no room for a heavenly king. The powers that be find no cause for joy in the birth of a redeemer. Too often, human power becomes corrupt, self-serving, and paranoid; Herod exemplifies all of that.

Now, given this story's dark take on human power, perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that the year of political campaigning to come may very likely degenerate into politics at its worst. And perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that in general, not only our country, but the nations of the world, seem to experience so much division, anger, and misery.

Without a doubt, there is a dark side to human nature, and we easily see that taking a look around—or a look within-- even among us who may not feel that powerful. But, human nature can corrupt and lead to some dark and evil acts, and most certainly that's the case with King Herod and his murderous rampage. So the darkness in this story is both physical and societal; much like the darkness we also experience.

But *all* is not darkness in the story of the Epiphany. The magi stand in sharp contrast to King Herod in our story today. They were leaders of power and wealth, and yet they remained open to God's revelation and willing to humble themselves to a divine power. Where Herod could only see a threat to his own power, they could see a chance for a new start for the world. They can be models for us of how power or wealth can be used for good and in the service of God. Their willingness to journey through darkness, taking on faith that the star would lead them to a new king, shines as a light for all the world in this story.

Most obviously, there is also the light of the guiding star itself that shines through the darkness of this gospel lesson. The star which reminds us that creation itself responded to Christ's birth and that God uses nature to reveal God's self to us. That star inspires us to look upward also, to search in our dark times for a light of revelation, a star to guide us, God's loving direction for our own lives when we most need it. Stars are always there, of course, by day or night; the sun is our day star, its light blocking out the other stars from our view. And at night time, there are an endless number of stars in the heavens about us and above us, whether or not they are shining brightly or are hidden from view by clouds. A strong reminder that whether or not we are always aware of God's light; it is present; it shines whether we see it or not. As people of faith, we should perhaps determine to be *star-struck*, more aware than most of the fiery beauty and light that God brings into darkness through starlight. At Christmas and through Epiphany we celebrate this coming of God's light specifically in the Incarnation of Christ. His coming, as St. John assures us in the first chapter of his Gospel, is all about light—John writes, “In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.” Just consider for a moment, that 2000 years later, that light of Christ still shines. The darkness of Herod, the darkness of all of human history, of evil, greed, and corruption, have not put it out. Every day the light of Christ is shining in every act of love, generosity, and self-sacrifice. In the midst of darkness of every kind, the light of God in Christ still shines: upon us, within us, and through us. So, let us be star-struck; let us light candles and bonfires and sing sacred songs and tell ancient stories of Scripture and perform acts of love and kindness as a part of God's light

shining in the darkness. And as we enter this new year of 2020 and this season of Epiphany, let us be seekers like those magi, searching the skies for stars and revelation, discovering anew God's love and guidance through all the ways God brings light and warmth into a dark world. Amen.