

sermon-1/3/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“ An Epiphany Meditation”
Matt. 2:1-12

We are celebrating Epiphany today even though it is not the right day. We are supposed to wait until the twelve days of Christmas are over before we get to Epiphany and the mysterious travelers from the East.

The Christian Church’s understanding of these visitors, these strange magi from the East, has been interesting. We know that by the time of Leo the Great in the early 400’s people were already talking about three Magi even though there is no scriptural evidence as to how many there were. Apparently the fact that three gifts were mentioned made some think there must have been three visitors.

By the time of the Honorable Bede in the late 600’s the three magi are given names: Melchoir, Gaspar and Balthasar. They even have ethnic identities and ages with Melchoir being an old man with a beard, Gaspar being a young beardless man, and Balthasar a black man.

The Church decided these men, probably from Babylon, represented the Gentiles coming to know the Christ child. It is rather telling that the gospel of Matthew has foreigners, and Gentiles at that, be the first witnesses to God’s incarnation in Israel.

Of course, there are some problems with this text that make it difficult for us to believe it as literal history. How in the world could they follow a star? Some have referred to this star as a heavenly GPS! Still, it is difficult to think about a star guiding someone to a specific place, let alone over a particular house.

The information about Herod also has problems. Josephus, a first century Jewish historian, never mentions the slaughter of the innocent baby boys even though he does list many of the abuses the Jewish people suffered under Herod. And, if Herod was so paranoid about a threat to his throne, and his paranoia is well-documented, you would think he would have the Magi tailed when they went to Bethlehem. That way they could see who this new-born king was and then only have to kill one baby.

As you can see, there are a whole host of questions this text brings to the surface. But, in spite of those unanswered questions, this story has captured the imagination of the Church down through the years. It has also offered us some important concepts to ponder in this season of light we have come to call Epiphany.

First, and perhaps foremost, this text honors spiritual seekers. One commentator says these Magi represent spiritual seekers from outside the mainline religious tradition. They remind him of all the modern day spiritual seekers who find the mainline Church uncomfortable. Instead they explore their spirituality from the perspectives of eastern religions, nature religions, astrology or even psychic phenomenon.

He goes on to say we all have our own idiosyncratic story to tell of how we made our way to the Christ child. Some of us have left the Church at various times in our lives seeking meaning in other places. While I am glad I finally made my way back to the Church, I do not regret most of the searching I did in my younger years outside the Church. I am sure many of you have similar stories to tell in your spiritual journey.

Matthew says the Magi did not use scripture to make their way to Israel. They found their way using the science of that day. There is no indication they ever converted to Christianity or Judaism after they encountered the Christ child. We do know it changed them in some way because the text says they found their way home via a different path.

Matthew's gospel goes on to have Jesus encourage a seeking that was a "departure from status-quo thinking." In fact, it was the more status-quo religious folks in his day that could not see very clearly what God was doing in Jesus. It was the good religious folks who eventually plotted to kill Jesus.

This is not to say we all need to leave the Church and get into astrology or start taking psychedelic drugs in order to have a meaningful spiritual journey. It is to say we need to be very careful not to let our beloved religion and that religion's rituals blind us to what God is doing outside our comfortable religious paths.

It is telling that Herod went to the scriptures when he heard that the Magi were seeking "the King of the Jews." But, notice Herod did not go to scripture to have it change his life. He went to scripture for answers so that he might better be able to satisfy his own plans and hold on to his power. This ought to warn us from seeing the Bible as an answer book in our spiritual journey. The Bible is most helpful when its stories get under our skins and begin to interpret us and challenge us to think in fresh ways.

Herb O'Driscoll gives his own take on spiritual journeying this story brings to our attention. He says the Magi remind us of the importance of our inner traveling as we try to figure out what difference God's presence will make in our day to day living.

For O'Driscoll, Herod represents all those things that conspire to halt our journey toward Christ. Who or what functions as Herod in your spiritual journey, your inner traveling? What worry, commitment, or even obsession makes it difficult for you to move beyond the status-quo in your search for what is sacred?

Notice as well the trajectory of these first twelve verses in Matthew's second chapter. They move from seeking, to finding, and then to giving. We will know if our spiritual seeking is legitimate if after we have found something profound, found some experience of the sacred, that it leads to giving. If it leads to playing it safe, to hoarding what we have, then maybe we have not found God's incarnation in our seeking.

Finally, as another commentator notes, Matthew is big on the image of light. The Magi, right at the beginning of his gospel, follow the light. It leads them "by the splendor of grace to the knowledge of the truth."

Matthew will go on to have Jesus tell his disciples they are to be light to the world, leading others to God in Christ. That is such a touching image. We are to live in such a way that our lives will shed light on the path to God. So many are stumbling around in the dark in our world. They are not on any spiritual journey, or their journey is so perfunctory it cannot possibly lead them anywhere. Epiphany says, "Let your light shine. Be light to others."

As we take communion this day, may we commit ourselves to keeping at our own unique spiritual journeys to God. May we trust that if we follow whatever meager revelation we have, like the Magi, we will find our way to God's Christ. And we will know that we have arrived if it causes us to be more generous with our gifts. Amen