

Epiphany - Seeking the Light

Isaiah 60:1-6

Matthew 2:1-12

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Today we mark the beginning of the season of Epiphany – that season of the church year when we think about God's revelation of truth and light to the world. Traditionally, the wise travelers from the east have been representatives of Epiphany. So we hear from the three kings and take one final look at the birth narratives. Last week we heard the story of Simeon and Anna – devoted followers of Yahweh who greeted the newborn Jesus at his dedication in the temple in Jerusalem. In some ways it seems a little backwards to return to the magi today. But because the two stories come from two different gospels, we're not at all sure of the chronology. It's possible that in fact the magi did find Jesus after Simeon and Anna. Jesus would have been presented in the temple on the 8th day according to tradition. And though our nativity scenes have the magi finding Jesus on the night of his birth, it might have taken up to 2 years for them to locate the child Jesus – we're not exactly sure of the timing. In fact, we're not sure about much of anything related to the magi. Tradition calls them kings and numbers them three. But the number comes from the number of gifts given, not from a number of visitors named in scripture. They were probably well educated scholars who studied the stars looking for signs and revelations of wisdom – whether royal princes or not, we don't know. Tradition has them coming from Babylon, the place to the east of Jerusalem where the Israelites were sent into exile and captivity – so perhaps the strangers represent any culture that does not seem to recognize the one true God. Theologically, it's appropriate that the wise men are the last of the visitors in the birth narratives. First, Jesus the baby was found by those who most needed the good news – that is the poor and the working class peasants - represented by the shepherds. Next, Jesus was revealed to the good faithful Jews who were seeking God's presence in the temple – Simeon and Anna. Both had been serving Yahweh all their lives, both had long awaited and expected a Messiah, and both understood what a remarkable gift God had given in this child born as King of the Jews and Savior of the world. With the visit of the magi – the wise seekers from far away – the gift of God opens wide to all the nations of the world. The theological symbolism is complete and Christ comes to everyone even as a baby. The wise men, therefore, however many there really were, and whenever they arrived – the wise seekers traveling from afar, represent all seekers of faith in the world throughout all generations who come to know God through Jesus Christ. People looking for signs – in the heavens, in the political powers of the day, open to wisdom from diverse sources, open to revelation from God, - wanting revelation from God, wanting to know about God, indeed, to know God. These wise men represent all the diversity of our world – sometimes seeking, sometimes lost, sometimes understanding, sometimes exotic or mysterious, sometimes unknown, sometimes unexpected, but always – always welcome before Jesus.

That's the point of Epiphany – not the birth of Jesus, but the "so what" of the birth.

Epiphany is about God's revelation to all the world. - God coming in Jesus Christ to everyone. - God reaching out for everyone. Epiphany isn't just for us, as Christ isn't just for us. Epiphany is about inviting the stranger home – inviting the stranger who is always welcome with God.

The invitation of the season of Epiphany is to welcome the seeker - whoever they may be - into the presence of God, and into the community of the faithful.

Seeking God isn't about having all the answers. Seeking God is about asking the questions. Seeking God is about following the star, looking for the light, moving forward, noticing and responding. I find it interesting that the star was there for all to see - in the sky, shining brightly - and yet only these few came searching. The star was there, the sign of God's presence, of God's miracle was obvious for everyone - but not everyone saw. And so it is today. The signs are all around us. The signs of God's love, the assurances of God's presence, the miracles of God's grace - they are everywhere. Our task is to see the signs, to notice the miracles of God, to go seeking the presence of God, and to invite others along on this journey of discovery that is faith.

So the scripture and the season of Epiphany present a challenge to all of us - to welcome the seeker. Think about those in our world who are still seeking the light of Christ - you know them, perhaps you even are such a seeker. Like the wise travelers of old - looking for signs of something greater, signs of God's presence and of God's plan for the world; - Those who are seeking understanding and even wisdom; - Those who are seeking to come to know God in more concrete ways. Think about those who are seeking God's love and then think about ways you can show that love. Think about ways you can tell people about God's grace. Think about ways you can demonstrate God's generosity, God's mercy. Just as the wise men followed the star to the Christ child, we are called to seek the light, and further to shine God's light in the world so that others might find what they are seeking, so that others might come to know God, and to live God's love. We shine the light of Christ by demonstrating that love in the world in the way we live our daily lives - caring, sharing, working for justice, serving the least among us.

The scripture from Isaiah for today says - Arise, shine for your light has come. Indeed our light has come into the world. That's what we've been celebrating these last weeks. The light of the world has come to live among us in Jesus Christ. And that light has given light to all of us. Now, it's your time to shine. Epiphany is about seeing the revelation of God and sharing that light. So let your light shine - that all may see Christ.

In this congregation we enjoy the long-standing tradition of receiving a star word at Epiphany. It's a marvelous tradition and a great way to start the new year - seeking guidance from God, seeking illumination. It's a great way to be more intentional about listening to God's message for you in this time and place. And we all know, it doesn't really take a star word for God to speak to you, but that God can use that and many other ways to reach out to us. To hear God's word for you, it takes an open heart and a willing spirit. It's about seeking, and in the search finding whatever gift God has for you. For there are many gifts - some which we bring and leave at Christ's feet, and some which we carry on with us to use along the journey. As you contemplate your word for the new year, and as you continue seeking God's presence and guidance, may you be blessed by the light of Christ, and may you share that light in the world.