



“Star Light, Star Bright”

Texts: Isaiah 60:1-6 and Matthew 2:1-12

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It has often been said that Presbyterians are “a day late and a dollar short,” but in the case of the Epiphany of the Lord, it is totally true. The actual day of Epiphany was yesterday – January 6 – the twelfth day of Christmas with the drummers drumming and the lords a leaping and all the rest. The problem is that you can’t get Presbyterians to be too excited about worship on Sunday, let alone throw an extra Saturday service at them. So, we’ve put off the celebration to this morning.

The word “epiphany” means “manifestation” or “unveiling.” It means a moment of insight or a sudden revelation. It is what is commonly called an “aha-moment” – that moment when things become apparent and suddenly make sense. An epiphany is when the curtain is drawn back and we can see what is going on.

What we celebrate today is “the Epiphany of the Lord.” This is the close of the Christmas season and we are called to think deeply about what has just occurred. Christmas has more to say than “you will find a babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” Christmas has more to tell than a birth story. Epiphany offers us the opportunity to stand with our backs to the manger and look forward in time to the work of God that is about to unfold on earth.

The way we talk about Epiphany is challenging. We use highly symbolic language and images which, if taken literally, present more questions than answers. The traditional carols of Epiphany are not helpful. Consider “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Matthew’s telling of the story does not refer to “kings” or how many there were. We assume three kings because there are three gifts to the child mentioned in the gospel. The word “kings” is not used. The word employed is “magi” – which can mean priestly people, astronomers, and even sorcerers. It is the root of our word “magic.”

The magi followed a star. Astronomers would be expected to observe stars. But even amateur astronomers will tell you that stars do not move. They are stationary points in the sky, which is what makes it possible to navigate on earth by where the stars are in the sky. Comets move, but they move pretty quickly. And even a comet will not “stop and stay right over the place where Jesus lay.”

So, approaching this story in a literal way isn’t really all that helpful. We’ll need another approach.

Fortunately for us, the people who compiled the lectionary – the assigned readings for this day – give us great help. To begin unlocking the symbolic language, they send us to Isaiah’s prophecy:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over
you.
Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of
your dawn...
A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian
and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

Matthew, who is writing to a Jewish audience, uses the imagery from Isaiah to tell the story of Jesus’ epiphany. “Light”...”kings...”gold and frankincense” – it’s all right there. Matthew is using very familiar words and images to his audience – words and images that may not be so familiar to us – to communicate the good news. To the ancient people of Israel, in exile from their homeland, despondent and dejected, comes the good news that God is restoring them in the sight of all the people of the earth. No longer will they be a laughing stock to the nations. They will be the envy of the nations because God is making of them a glory and a wonder. Because of what God will do for them, the world will rejoice and give thanks.

What God is doing will be like light shattering the darkness. If you can remember the warm days of summer, we all were caught up in the solar eclipse. It was astounding! The light was shining, then growing darkness, then complete darkness in the middle of the day. The night birds sang and the crickets chirped. And then came that moment when the moon began moving on and the first piercing shaft of light shattered the darkness. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it," wrote John. The light has entered the darkness of the broken world and all people shall see it and they shall flock to the new light and be made new.

And what better symbol of light is there than that of a star? A light that shines in the darkness. A light that guides the traveler home. A light that draws us out of the ordinary and into the extraordinary.

Matthew is using ancient symbols and ancient language to tell us the new good news. In Jesus Christ, the light of God has entered the world. In Jesus Christ, the darkness is shattered and dispelled. In Jesus Christ, God has pulled back the curtain to reveal to all the world who God is, what God is like, and who we are created to be and how we are meant to live.

Following Stars

Now, here's the thing about epiphanies: you have to be awake and aware in order to see them. Epiphanies are sometimes bold and sometimes subtle. These manifestations of God's presence are sometimes as plain as the nose on your face and sometimes are as hidden as Waldo in all those puzzles.

The challenge for you and me is to be on the lookout for those moments when God is made plain and real. Our challenge is to be awake and aware. Like the magi of Matthew's story, we are called to search the heavens and the earth for that one star - that one moment - that one happening - when God is manifested - made real - when God is revealed.

It's a bit of a coincidence that the Torah portion in Reformed Synagogues this Shabbat is the story of Moses and the burning bush. Talk about an epiphany! God meets Moses and calls him to a new life. But the story tells us that Moses saw the bush aflame and didn't pass it by. Moses went to see this bush, aflame and not consumed. Moses was alert enough to see it. And when he came to the bush, he realized what it was, and he took off his shoes in awe, wonder, and reverence.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning took hold of the image and wrote:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God,
But only he who sees takes off his shoes;
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Being willing and able to see these moments when God breaks in, when God draws near, when God's presence is made clear as a star in the night sky – this is our challenge. And when these moments of epiphany come to us, we must decide if we will take off our shoes – embrace the extraordinary – or pick blackberries – carry on with the commonplace and the mundane.

When we were children, we were taught to look for the first star in the night sky and then we would say:

Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight,

I wish I may, I wish I might,

Have the wish I wish tonight.

The catch, of course, was being aware enough to see the first star of the night. Awareness, mindfulness, consciousness, attentiveness – call it what you will. In order to experience the fullness of what God is doing, we have to be on the lookout.

And when we are aware and we take it in, then, like those magi of old, we will rejoice with overwhelming joy. Joy that is for now and evermore. Amen.



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