

**Sermon: Epiphany Sunday, January 8, 2017**

**Matthew 2: 1-12**

**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

This past Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, was the festival of the Epiphany – the day when we mark the journey of the magi to pay homage to the Christ child. This festival, and the weeks following, uses the language of light: stars, illumination, brightness in the midst of darkness, with Jesus declared to be light to the nations. In addition to the contrast between light and darkness, which we see so clearly in the world around us in these days of short days and long nights, Epiphany speaks of the other type of “enlightenment”: having something “dawn” on you that had not previously make itself evident.

As we begin this new year 2017, it seems to me that we need to embrace the wonder and power of Epiphany more than most years. After one of the most confusing, unsettling years that the world has seen in decades, revisiting the story of sages visiting from another land, Herod’s sinister agenda, and the luminous impact of a Bethlehem star and a long-awaited child of promise, is both relevant and welcomed.

### 1. THE WISE MEN/ MAGI/ SAGES

We do well to remember, in engaging all of this story, that Jesus and his parents were Jews. Knowing that, Matthew’s words of visitors from another land and, we surmise, another religion make clear that the arrival of Jesus, the awaited Messiah, was good news that would reach beyond his own people. But before we get too deep into the details, it would be good to hear a few words from Marcus Borg & John Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The First Christmas* (pp. 183-184):

“Given that we do not think of the wise men as actual historical figures but as characters in a [allegorical] narrative, it may seem idle to speculate about who they were. But we can nevertheless ask who *Matthew* imagined them to be, just as we can ask such a question about characters in a parable....The magi in Matthew’s story come ‘from the East.’ [Again, it] is idle to speculate about what more specific geographical area they might have come from – this is sacred geography, not physical geography. What matters for Matthew is that they are Gentiles. As Gentiles, they are from ‘the nations.’ Wise men from the nations are drawn to the light of Jesus, kneel before him, and pay him homage. The nations acknowledge one born ‘King of the Jews’; he is their king as well.”

The prophet Isaiah, in particular, repeatedly spoke of the expansion of God’s concern, starting with the people of Judah but drawing all nations and all peoples to God’s holy mountain. Matthew picks up on that, by telling of foreigners drawn to worship Jesus. For the Jewish people at this time, this *could* have been perceived as good news - or there may have been a bit of possessive envy. As challenging as it had been for their nation, the self-understanding of being “God’s chosen people” may have been hard to share, like an older child in a family sensing an unwelcome rival in the birth of a new sibling.

Meanwhile, the story of the Magi is for us Christians without a Jewish bloodline, nothing but good news, because the Magi are our key spiritual ancestors. In the Magi, we have a tangible expression that the invitation of God in Christ is to all people. A star beckons to all women and men who are seeking to deepen their understanding of and involvement in this diverse, mysterious, wonderful gift of life, an invitation mirrored on communion Sundays when we are reminded of God’s desire to meet all of us at table. And in these days when each nation of the world seems to be struggling to determine how to relate to newcomers - immigrants, economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers – the fact that, in Matthew’s account at least, the first recorded visitors to the Christ child were foreigners, is a fact worth noting.

In Luke, the message of the Messiah’s birth reaches out to shepherds, marginalized within their own culture. In Matthew, the reach-out is to people who are outsiders by way of nationality. And in both cases, nothing meaningful would have happened unless the shepherds and the magi were curious to learn more, and willing to take the risk to find out. May that curiosity be a hallmark of our coming

year together: learning together, growing together, risking together, in a community that is willing to be changed by new people, new ideas, new avenues for faith to flourish.

## 2. HEROD'S AGENDA

Mark Davis, my go-to guy when it comes to Greek interpretation, makes this succinct comment about Herod's secret conversation with the Magi: "Ah, secrecy, the dear old friend of tyranny. There you are."

As our attention is captured by the misty nostalgia of exotic travellers arriving by camel train, and the deeply symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, we may miss the bloody agenda of King Herod. Like all insecure leaders, whether they are using the inside track to protect their power and possessions or licking their lips as they prepare to bury their rivals, Herod seeks false friendship with the Magi to extract from the location of the Messiah. He meets with them "in secret" – an attempt to butter up these visitors by bestowing special, "insider" status on them, while at the same time ensuring that nobody sees this act of desperation. Fortunately, the wise men were savvy enough to not only avoid giving Herod the information he is clambering after, but to return home by a route that does not include a repeat visit with their fickle new friend.

As much as I want to see the best in people, I recognize that we live in a world dominated by powers and principalities. Though we frequently, especially on a person-to-person level, see wonderful, selfless acts that expect no repayment, that is not nearly so common on a corporate or political level. Self-interest governs all kinds of decisions and it brokers all kinds of side deals, and in the midst of that, Herod continues to try his best to extinguish the light (as Borg & Crossan would put it, pp.183-184). As people of Christ, we need to be just suspicious enough and just crafty enough to see through the acts of tyrants, and stand with those whose lives are being weakened by the powers-that-be.

This, then, is a second hope for our coming year. As a Church we have the ability and responsibility to be the body of Christ in the world, thus being the first line of defense when the vulnerable are targeted, so my hope is that we will find our voice when it is needed. As you've seen in the weekly newsletter, and in the bulletin, your input is invited in determining the kinds of special events and celebrations we will mark in the coming year, and I have a hope that our time together will include participation in local or global social issues, so please bring forward your ideas and your expertise as we set our agenda for 2017.

## 3. LUMINOSITY: THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM and the LIGHT OF CHRIST

A spiritual director in the southern states named Anna Shirey has written a most wonderful piece about Epiphany, and the way that the light of Christ illumines our path in a new way. She writes,

"Epiphany is about believing in the possibility of a change in fortune. Too often we limit our future based on what we've experienced in the past. If we've suffered physical pain for the past few decades we expect that it will continue. If we've had a series of heartbreaking relationships we expect the pattern to happen again and again. If we've been unsuccessful in achieving our dreams we decide that our dreams were unrealistic in the first place, and will never come true.

"But Epiphany challenges us to see things differently. It reminds us that God is at work in the world, constantly opening up new paths to us, inviting us to dream in bigger and better ways. If only we will allow ourselves to believe, to dream, to trust in God's lovingkindness toward us, the truth will suddenly appear, like the light has been switched on.

"It takes time to accept a complete reversal of our expectations – and it usually starts with a faith crisis. I think of a faith crisis as that first blinding moment of insight, when we feel painfully disoriented and just want to cover our eyes and turn away. Of course we weren't exactly happy in the dark, but at least we had an idea of how to navigate it. Now everything has changed! It takes time for that first blinding moment to relent, time and faith that soon it will be replaced by new sight and new life.

“This is the way of Epiphany: blindness gives way to a growing experience of insight and strength. Finally we make the life change – the king of our hearts declares that it’s time for us to take action, and we do! We bask in the glory of our change of fortune. We can see clearly now and we rejoice – until that next blinding moment of new insight.”

I love what Anna has written here: Epiphany is the time when we and the world let God-in-Christ break through the places in our lives where the light does not shine. Epiphany is the place where our set notions of things get challenged by a beam of light, showing us that we may not be as smart as we think we are. Epiphany is the place where our gloomiest impossibilities are illumined by the liberating light of Christ.

And that leads to a third hope. May all that we do this year be done in the name of Christ Jesus. *How* we understand Jesus will vary from person to person, but as a Church there is no opt-out clause that lets us pick a different way. The greatest asset of any congregation, is its ability to be a conduit for the love and light of Christ to shine, the humility to trust that God’s power to reconcile and make new is all we need, the ability to nurture faith even in the midst of doubt.

On this day of gold, frankincense and myrrh, may the gifts of curiosity, and courage, and faith, be with us all and guide the next steps of our journey. Amen.

References cited:

Borg, Marcus J and Crossan, John Dominic. *The First Christmas: what the gospels really teach about Jesus’s birth*. NYC: HarperOne, 2007.

Davis, Mark. <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.ca/2013/12/the-child-king-messiah-shepherd-child.html>

Shirey, Anna. <http://thelabyrinthway.net/change-of-fortune/>

© 2017, Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.