

Epworth Chapel on the Green
January 03, 2016
Feast of the Epiphany
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Isaiah 60:1-9
Psalm 72:1-2,10-17
Ephesians 3:1-12
Matthew 2:1-12

We find ourselves once again at that time of year where we encounter the intriguing story which tells of wise men, a jealous and power-hungry king, a star, a dream, and the death of innocent children.

Epiphany. The word means “manifestation.” A “showing forth” or “revelation.” Typically we use the term to refer to Jesus who has been born as the Light of the world. We use it to announce that Jesus has come for Gentiles as well as Jews, as our words from Paul to the Ephesians demonstrate.

This truth is also reflected in the story of the Magi who travel a great distance in order to discover the Christ. These foreigners were definitely not a part of the covenant people. But as Paul tells the Ephesians, “God’s purpose was to make peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new person from the two groups...By his death he ended the whole system of Jewish law that excluded the Gentiles.” (Eph. 2:15)

Have you ever wondered why these foreign astrologers from the East have been called “wise” men? No doubt they were astute individuals, but the wisdom

we ascribe to them typically has had more to do with spiritual, or biblical, wisdom.

This story reveals to us ways in which these men were wise, and I want to share four of those ways with you today.

First, these men sought Christ. They traveled a great distance, and their journey took a long time. At times it was no doubt arduous, and dangerous. But still they traveled on in search of the Christ.

T.S. Eliot captures something of this in his poem, *Journey of the Magi*:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter."
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty, and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly.*

The words of Matthew 6:33 echo in our ears at this point: “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and the wealth of his righteousness.”

As this new year unfolds, I want to challenge you tonight to be seekers after Christ. Seek to know him better this year. *Resolve to follow him, wherever that may lead you.* Pursue holiness. Make your relationship with Christ the primary pursuit of your life.

Second, these men worshiped Christ. If we are not careful, it would be easy to fall prey to the notion that these men sought Christ merely out of their intellectual curiosity. It would be easy to emphasize the astrological or astronomical elements to the story.

But we should not be mistaken. *These men sought the Christ in order to worship him.* They say as much to Herod when they arrive in Jerusalem, and they ask, “Where is the one born King? We saw his star in the East, and have come to worship him.”

And when they do finally arrive and they see Jesus, the text tells us they “bowed down and worshiped him.”

As this new year unfolds, I want to challenge you to make the worship of God your primary focus and aim. Seek Christ not merely to learn more about him, but to worship him. Do not be satisfied with *information*, but press on toward *transformation* in your life with Christ.

Third, these men sacrificed to Christ. When they bowed in worship, they opened gifts for this infant king, gifts that were costly and were probably brought at great sacrifice by the gift-bearers.

The gold, frankincense, and myrrh that these men brought with them were so expensive that a normal person could not afford even one, much less three, of this type of gift. I cannot verify this, but I read somewhere of a tradition that says that the money from these gifts could have supported Joseph and Mary and the baby for the entire time that they were on the run and fleeing for their safety.

In any case, the gifts they brought were costly. And in the year ahead, I want to challenge you today to examine your own hearts, and to give the best of who you are to Christ this year. Many people are content with what I call “leftover” living. They spend their time and energy chasing this and that, and Christ gets the leftovers. Christ gets what’s left of their *time*, their *talent*, their *treasure*. Their relationship with Christ is *cozy*, but it is not *costly*. These men were wise, however, because they gave to Christ the ***best*** of what they had, not the ***rest*** of what they had.

As 2016 unfolds, I challenge you not to be content with “leftover” living. Give to Christ your best self.

Fourth, these men obeyed. The text tells us that “being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned home by another way.”

Now we typically look at this and understand it at the literal level, which is fine. These men took a different path home, a path that avoided King Herod.

But there is another sense in which we can see it. Going home another way is also a metaphor for returning home changed and transformed. These men returned home in a different state of mind and heart. Life would never be the same for them after this encounter with Jesus.

These men returned home with a new frame of reference. Perhaps they returned to their jobs with a greater sense of servant hood. They returned home not merely by avoiding King Herod, but perhaps also by being more sensitive to injustice and by doing what they could to make a difference. Returning home another way is a metaphor for transformation.

The Christmas season has come and gone again for us this year. This Christmas season brought us once again to the manger and the infant King. With our hearts, minds, and voices we worshiped him. We rejoiced at the Word-made-flesh. We celebrated the truth of Immanuel, God with us. We brought gifts to family, friends and neighbors. Some of us even traveled long distances to far away places.

The question I must ask is: Are we changed? Did our encounter with the holy child lift our hearts such that we worshiped him with abandon?

Each week, we gather here hoping to be changed by the message of Christmas, the incredible message of mercy, love, and grace. Each week, we join our voices in song and prayer, recalling the mighty acts of God. Each week, we come to the Table, so that we might be fed and sent out again into the world. Each week, we are drawn to worship this King.

As 2016 unfolds and we gather in this place week after week, may we not only worship him, but may we also rise and return home each week by another way. May God never leave us the same way he finds us when we enter this place. May we be *seekers, worshipers, sacrificers, and obeyers*, never able to walk the exact same road again, and always returning home another way. Once again, T.S.

Eliot challenges us:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.* (T.S. Eliot, 1885-1965)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.