

Feast of the Epiphany A sermon preached by the Rev. Adrien Dawson, January 6, 2008

Gospel

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: `And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

A few weeks before I was to be ordained to the priesthood, I made a retreat to the Trappist monastery in Berryville, VA. Most people drive to the monastery for their retreat. Some just make the trip to Berryville for the gift shop; they have excellent honey and preserves and fudge. However, I decided that I would hike along the Appalachian Trail and then walk off the trail and into the monastery. I started in Harpers Ferry and walked South along the trail for three days to get to the brothers in Berryville. It was late November and the weather was definitely turning cold. The first day, I arose early, got on the trail and had an excellent day of hiking. I easily covered my mileage, got into camp, pitched a tent, cooked dinner and discovered that it gets dark at 5:30 PM in late November. I curled up in my sleeping bag, zipped up my tent, and wondered if I could really sleep for the next 13 hours before the sun came up again. I was shocked by the length of darkness that winter brings. Even though I had noticed before that the sun sets earlier and rises later in the winter – it never impacted me until I was hiking in the wilderness.

The winter solstice falls each year around Dec. 21st and marks the longest night of the year, and consequently the shortest day. After Dec. 21st, the light begins to make a comeback. Little by little the sun stays up longer and rises earlier. It is hard for us to notice these subtle shifts of season because we live in a world of constant electric light. We flip a switch and the light shines in the darkness. We not only have on-demand light inside our homes, but we light the streets, parking lots, and any place where people might need to see in the darkness of night. We have so much electric light in our cities that we describe it as light pollution. Many of our children will grow up without seeing the vast array of stars that grace the sky because the light that we generate keeps the stars hidden in a halo of our own making. If we want to see the stars, we have to have a massive power failure, or we must travel away from civilization and into the wilderness to find some darkness.

Two thousand years ago, the Magi did not have the problem of light pollution. Matthew's gospel shares with us the exotic story of wise men who follow a star to Bethlehem. These wise men were probably some cross between astronomers and astrologers. At the time, an established religion in the East was Zoroastrianism, which involved a lot of study of the stars and planets in order to understand the present and predict the future. The important point that Matthew is making is that these magi are not Jews. They are not members of the covenant, they don't read the Torah, they do not worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet, through their study of the sky, they have noticed a new light shining in the heavens. They have embarked on a long journey to find the reason for this star that has begun to shine during the darkest and longest nights of winter. I imagine that they may have saddled up their camels around the winter solstice and two weeks later, they reach the city of Jerusalem.

Today, we are celebrating the feast of the Epiphany, which literally means *in full view*, or *manifest, evident*. We celebrate that the light of Christ was so bright that it could not be contained in Bethlehem. The light of Christ was so bright, that the heavens could not keep it a secret. Matthew wants us to recognize that the Messiah is not just a light to shine for the Jews, but that all of creation is invited to see the Savior who has been born into the world. Even gentiles who practice a different religion in the East will come and worship the child.

When the magi arrive in Jerusalem, they expect to find the infant king in the royal household. They knock on Herod's door and ask him about the new star in the sky and the baby born to be king of the Jews. But Herod is not a scholar of the faith. When he consults the experts they quote to him from the prophet Micah, "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." Herod is not so happy that there is an heir to the throne born in Bethlehem. We know that he has a horrible plan up his sleeve to extinguish the light that has been born in the baby Jesus. The magi however are not phased in the least that the infant king will be found in a small town with a population less than 1,000. They are willing to go anywhere to witness something so momentous as to cause cosmic changes in the heavens even if it happens in a small town outside Jerusalem.

The magi were seeking the Christ, the new light that had come into the world because they were astronomers who studied the darkness of the night. Often, our own faith journeys follow this same pattern. Before we can find the light, we first have to put out the lights of our own making. We have to extinguish the lights that keep us from sitting still in the darkness. Our eyes must adjust to the deep darkness so that we might discern the true light of Christ. Sometimes we discover the darkness because we make a decision to go on retreat, to unplug from our regular world. Sometimes the darkness falls on us in a crisis of illness or disease that forces us to face our own mortality and our dependence on others to care for us. Sometimes the darkness descends with the recognition of sin in our lives and the ways that our own choices have snuffed out the light. There are many ways that we might find ourselves in the deep darkness that we normally avoid. Once we are there, and we get up the courage to look around, we will see a new light in the sky that we had never noticed before.

Think about your own faith journeys. When you found yourself in the deep darkness, what was the glimmer of light that drew you closer to Christ? What brightness did you see that caused you to turn your life around so that you might go to Bethlehem, find Christ and worship him? Was it a person? A piece of scripture? Music? A voice from God? A prayer answered? An unreasonable experience of hope? A child? A community of faith? There are a million

ways that the light of Christ shines in the darkness, each of them a tailor made star for us to follow.

I have a challenge to set before you all in the year to come. The challenge is this: *All of you* are the light of Christ blazing in the darkness. This community of faith, St. Mark's on the Hill, *is* the light of Christ and people are traveling through the darkness to *this* place to find Christ and worship him. I challenge you to be the light to all who are seeking Christ in their lives. Whenever anyone comes through our doors to join us for worship, welcome them into the light of Christ and let them know that they have followed the star to the right place. Whenever you encounter anyone who is wandering in deep darkness, let the light of Christ shine through you and be their star so that they may follow you and find Jesus. Invite them into this stable where we fall down on our knees, offer gifts from our treasure, and worship Jesus Christ, a messiah for all people. Do not hide your light under a bushel. Do not let anyone blow it out. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

Amen.