

Gospel -

Epiphany

Sermon 1.5.20

Patti Case



Epiphany. An epiphany is a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something. Interesting that in our culture we often call those “lightbulb moments.” We should probably call them “star moments.”

Because this feast day, Epiphany, we sing about a star of wonder, star of night, star of royal beauty bright... guiding us to that perfect light of Christ Jesus.

There may have been three wise men, or 12, or some other number. Some scholars insist they were of royal birth, others scoff at that idea, but they were likely learned men who studied an early combination of astrology and astronomy, which meant they spent a lot of time looking at the night sky. So they saw a new light and associated it with the Old Testament prophecy where Balaam (BAIL-um) told King Balak: (BAY lak)

I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near—
a star shall come out of Jacob,
and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;
(Numbers 24:17)

We don't know where these wise men came from, either. “East” covers a lot of territory. And these magi may have taken months or even years to arrive at Bethlehem, but almost certainly they didn't arrive twelve days after Jesus was born. Most Biblical scholars agree that the wise men were not Jewish, pointing out that this king had come to earth for everyone, not just a segment of society.

We do know the wise men from the east traveled a great distance to visit the baby king. They showed up in Jerusalem first, assuming that a king would be located at the royal palace. But the star had stopped in a place nine miles away. Bethlehem. An unlikely location for a king, a savior.

The star, too, is a subject of much scholarly argument. Was it a comet? A supernova? Or was it a miracle? Stars don't just appear and disappear. And they don't stop over a specific location. This one did.

Further, Matthew's account tells us is that these learned people who had come so far, undergoing much peril along the way, were overwhelmed with joy when they saw the star had stopped, pointing directly to a humble home in Bethlehem. Though they were strangers they were allowed to enter, something that would almost certainly not happen in today's culture. They fell to their knees and paid homage to this little baby.

And one more thing: They returned to their homes using a different route. That may sound simple but they didn't have the advantage of Google Maps. Instead of the familiar trade routes, they may have been taken hundreds of miles out of their way to try and move Herod off the scent.

That is an incredible amount of effort to exert in the name of diplomacy, from a group of wealthy men who had plenty of other things to do with their time. These travelers didn't have the advantage of Air Force I. Unlike these men, I am a lifelong Christian and I can't say as I've put that much effort forth in following the star that symbolizes Christ. Have you?

I don't know whether you've read *The Story of the Other Wise Man*, by Henry Van Dyke. It's a lovely story written in the late 1800s, describing the journey of a fourth wise man. He, too, was a Gentile. He, too, saw a star, connected it with

the ancient prophecy. He, too, brought gifts to the King of the Jews. But this fourth wise man missed his rendezvous with the other three. Why? Because he stopped to help a man who was in trouble.

He misses the Christ Child, too, arriving after the family had fled Bethlehem. He continues to search for this Jesus person and along his journey, he must give up each of his valuable gifts, to fund his continued journey or to protect the vulnerable he meets along the way. My mother used to read this story every year, and it's part of the fabric of my Christmas traditions. I'm particularly fascinated by one of this wise man's gifts for the Christ child, a pearl.

I have a set of pearls that was once my mother's. As the story goes, and as I can attest, pearls take on the patina of age, the oils of our skin add to their luster over time so that their value is increased by, for lack of a better term, "experience." When I wear my pearls, my mother seems closer to me. In the story of the fourth wise man, his pearl "becomes more luminous and precious the longer it is carried close to the warmth of the beating heart." The symbolism is not subtle.

Though it is his last gift, the wise man gives his pearl up in ransom for a girl who was to be sold as a slave. He never found the king. But on his death bed, he "knew that all was well, because he had done the best that he could, from day to day. He had been true to the light that had been given to him."

The lesson is obvious, and no less profound than when it was written. The story provides wonderful illustration of what it must have been like to have been one of those searching magi from the east, intent on finding and worshipping a child king and wondering, as we do today, whether the work we do along the way is part of our holy path or a distraction from it. He faced real life along his journey, as do we.

Have you kept at your path, despite distractions? Have you kept your eye on that star, that light?

In the words of the Reverend Clare Kelley:

"Even if we did not ask, God has been very clear about what we have been chosen for
the people of God are to be an epiphany
a star shining in the dark
a sign pointing to God
a revelation of who God is and what God is doing in the world
a manifestation of God in the world.

Being one of God's chosen certainly has its privileges
we are forgiven for our sins
we are loved, and we know it
we are never alone.

But it also has its duties
we must let our light shine
we must be the opposite of the darkness around us
we must be the light of the world.

Now, sometimes it's easy to be light
in the middle of Christmas
when all is going well
when our church is growing and getting stronger
when we are surrounded by people we love
it's easy to shine with love ourselves
to be filled with joy
to be loving and forgiving and generous and kind.

But it's not always easy to be light
it's not always easy to point to God
after all our God is not always what and where you expect God to be
our God is a vulnerable child lying in a manger
and our God is a loving healer who reaches out to sinners
and our God is love that is beyond our comprehension or capacity."

The refrain from our most popular Epiphany hymn resounds:

"Westward leading, still proceeding

Guide us to that perfect light."

Amen