

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-2

The Work of Christmas

Today we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany which comes after we complete the 12 Days of Christmas. Epiphany literally means “shine upon,” and is the season when we hear about the ways Jesus - the light of the world - shines upon - makes himself known in the early stories of his life.

While 12 days is not that long, it does seem that we’ve moved past Christmas doesn’t it? A lot of decorations have come down, kids are back in school, everyone’s back at work.

W. H. Auden in his great poem *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio* writes poignantly about these days after Christmas. Listen to a portion:

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --
Some have got broken -- and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week --
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted -- quite unsuccessfully --
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. ... In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
The night of agony still to come; the time is noon:
When the Spirit must practice his scales of rejoicing
Without even a hostile audience, and the Soul endure
A silence that is neither for nor against her faith
That God's Will will be done, That, in spite of her prayers,
God will cheat no one, not even the world of its triumph.*

We have traveled from the manger, back to our ordinary lives. But Epiphany gives us another journey – that of the Wise Men or the Magi to the Christ Child. They are the ones who follow the star actually – not the shepherds. The shepherds get the angels singing “Glory to God in the highest” and are told to look for a baby. So if we were really going to be liturgically precise in our decorations, we’d change the angel on the top of the tree to a star for this Sunday - fitting for the start of the season where Jesus shines.

But while today we are only 13 days after Jesus' birth, it's likely that the Magi made their visit to the Holy Family two years after his birth, not while they were still in the stable with the baby in the manger.

There are three clues to this in our reading.

1. They arrive to see Jesus while they are "in the house," not "lying in the manger" as the shepherds found him.
2. The Magi find a "child" not a baby as Jesus is called in the other passages.
3. Herod in his fear of this newborn King, had all boys under the age of 2 killed - an indicator that the Magi arrived well after he'd been born.

I don't know that it really matters WHEN the Magi show up, but I find it interesting to look closely at what the Bible says, especially about beloved and familiar texts. And it's nice to have an entire Sunday to shine some light on this important event that often gets overlooked as we go from Jesus' birth back to the ordinary days and Sundays of January.

The magi - and that is the Greek word - are foreigners, from the east. Somewhere along the way they were turned into Wise Men.

At any rate - they were magi from the east and they were definitely not Jewish - because as they come to Jerusalem to ask for directions to find Jesus, they refer to him as the King of the Jews and indicate that they want to worship him. Jews were waiting for the Messiah, which is how the Jewish scribes and leaders refer to him (here and elsewhere). Also, Jews would never worship a King - David, Solomon were never worshipped. For Jews, worship was reserved for God and God alone.

When you think about it, it makes sense that the Magi stopped for directions. Imagine using the stars, or a star, as your only guide to make a long trip. It's no surprise then that since they are looking for the king of the Jews, that they should go to the Jewish holy city and ask where they might find him.

So here come the magi to Jerusalem where Herod, a Jew, is ruler. But he was a very bad ruler. It was said that it was better to be Herod's dog than his son. He had already killed his first wife and two sons. This very paranoid man gets wind that there are some magi, following a star and looking for a new king of the Jews, recently born.

So Herod, being a good Jew (a bad ruler, but an observant Jew), does what all good Jews would do, he consults the Scriptures, which tell him - Bethlehem. And so, paranoid, conniving Herod, sends the Magi on their way, with instructions to return with his exact location, "so that he (Herod) could also worship this new king." Which is our first clue to his devious plan, since we know that Jews don't worship kings.

The Magi continue their journey and find the child and his parents in the house in Bethlehem and offer their gifts - inappropriate for a child, but quite fit for a king. And then... Then...after meeting the Christ Child, they become wise and they return to their own country by another road.

The word for road here though, is better translated "way." The early Christians were called "The Way," and so when we hear that the Magi return by another way, we know that the Magi didn't just drop their gifts and return to life as usual. It's as if their lives are changed for having met Jesus, they are different, and so now they are on a new path.

The Magi are important - not just to the Christmas story, but to us and our faith as well. Because they are clearly not Jewish, but from another country, we are reminded that Jesus is for ALL people. It doesn't matter where you come from or where you've been - Christ came for you and you will find him.

It is a journey though. We need to leave the manger, and not just leave it behind, pack it up and put it away until the calendar calls us to reconsider Jesus again next year. Rather, we need to set out, take a few steps in a new direction.

We would do well to leave Christmas and, like the Magi, not just follow a star, but to turn to the scriptures to seek and find Jesus. Because following your star alone won't get you to Jesus. You will still need to stop and ask for directions. And once you find Jesus, if you pause long enough to offer him your praise and your gifts, you'll leave a different person, wiser perhaps. He may even redirect your life.

The journey of the Magi can be our journey as well. Now that Christmas is over, we'll take down the greens and put away the decorations, and then the work will begin. Are you different for having celebrated Christmas? Did you find Jesus amidst the chaos of gifts and parties? After all, God promised that when Jesus was born, we would know Him/God like never before.

Because in him, there is wisdom and new life to be found. And you don't have to go very far. This morning, in fact, Jesus will be served right to you as we share in the Lord's Supper.

I pray that as we move from Christmas through Epiphany toward Lent, Good Friday and Easter that you will know Jesus' presence; that you will believe that not only has God sent His Son to Earth, but that God Himself has come to you, personally.

Look around... the blessings in your life? That's God at work.
Tough times these days? God is there also.
Not so sure? Well stick around, don't abandon the journey, you're on the right path.
Now that Christmas is over, the work of Christmas can begin.

Because God is at work in us fashioning us to be bearers of the light that has come into the world, the light that the darkness neither understands nor has overcome. God is at work fashioning an Epiphany people, people of the light, people who know that the joy and grace of Christmas is not a gift to be admired but one to be put to work for the sake of the world God loves so much. Amen.