
Sermon

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Homily from The Rev. Bill Harkins
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In the name of the God of Creation, who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to each of you on this Second Sunday after Christmas. Today we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, that event to which the journey of the Wise Men pointed. The story of the Wise Men, whose visit to Jesus is recounted today in the Gospel of Matthew, has fired the imaginations of countless persons down through the centuries. Often the results have been filled more with enthusiasm than with historical accuracy. Writers and artists have taken these few verses from Matthew and expanded and inflated them at times beyond recognition. This may have had to do with the exotic phrase, "Wise Men from the east," that caused people's minds to work overtime. I confess that I, too, find these words bringing a flood of images and questions to mind. Were they astronomers, astrologers, kings, or scholars? And where in the vast, mysterious east did their journey originate? Moreover, their gifts excite curiosity and arouse interest. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are interesting gifts, though in some ways they hardly seem appropriate to the occasion. Vicky recently told me about a skit in which the two wise men who brought, respectively, the frankincense and myrrh, turned to the one who brought the gift of gold, and said, somewhat embarrassed, "I thought we agreed on a price limit for these gifts." To make matters worse, Matthew helps us with the answers to none of these questions. And we might have used his help, for the imaginative responses to these passages have been mixed. One question prompted by this story goes as follows: Do you know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of three wise men? "They would have asked directions; Arrived on time; Helped deliver the baby; Cleaned the stable; Made a casserole; brought practical gifts; and there would be peace on earth,"

Another imaginative response was from the great artist Botticelli, who created one of his most well known works, called "The Adoration of the Magi," based on this theme. It is indeed a lovely work of art. Commissioned for the chapel in Santa Maria Novella, it was painted in 1475, and according to some art historians it honors the Medici family, generous patrons of Botticelli, by interpreting the three wise men as portraits of Cosimo, Giovanni, and Guiliano Medici. There is some dispute about this, but not about the fact that the Epiphany was a common subject in Florentine art, and Botticelli had already produced two versions of this scene. No, accuracy has often been sacrificed for imagination and hubris in the vacuum created by what we do not know about the wise men. Moreover, the ambiguity of the term "wise men from the east" provides the occasion for us to relegate them to the status of the other "the stranger" and in so doing rob us of the possible deeper connections we might have with their narrative journey. As is often the case, however, humor, humility, and poetry offer the possibility of helping us keep this story real.

Perhaps somewhat more accurate, for example was T.S. Eliot's poem "The Journey of the Magi"; "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 Eliot's lovely, ruggedly honest imagery invites us to take that journey with them: ",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 ringing in our ears, saying that this was all folly." It is a powerful poem, which I recommend to you in its entirety. And we do not begrudge Eliot his questions either, do we? Was it all folly, this rough and long journey" and remember, the Holy Child was by now about one year

old" or was there something to all this talk of a light, and a King? Martin Luther's sermon on the coming of the Magi may have captured the true feeling that surrounded this event. The great reformer described how perplexed these "wise men" were upon arriving in Jerusalem. Not only were they road weary and saddle sore after having come from Persia; not only were they tired and weathered after week upon week of relentless travel, but they were ready for a celebration. They were all set for torches and feasting, merrymaking and dancing in the streets" yet when they arrived Jerusalem was as quiet as a library. Not a creature was stirring. Luther in his sermon went on to say, "The birth of a puppy would have caused more excitement than the birth of Jesus in Jerusalem." The wise men must have been, as T.S. Eliot suggests" haunted by the uncertainty: had their stargazing been wrong? Had this light from the heavens actually pointed to another reality" something entirely different from the birth of the "king of the Jews"? Had they journeyed all this way in vain? The only "king of the Jews" they encounter in Jerusalem is Herod. And he is no surprise whatsoever. Like many other "kings" he wields great power, with many under his command. He has extravagantly renovated and enlarged the temple. And he is very concerned about someone out there still in diapers who is purported to be more powerful than he. Herod was no more than a vassal of the Roman Emperor, but he was a skilled politician who had secured control over half a dozen provinces. To his court the wise men came. Herod instructed them to report back when they had found their king. Prompted by God, the Wise Men found a different way back to their homes. Herod never saw them again. "We returned to our places, these Kingdoms," Eliot writes of the Magi, "But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." Yes, Eliot helps us to hear this story in human terms, for is it not the case that in this sense we are all like the Magi, who, having encountered Emmanuel" God among us" cannot go back home the same way they came, no, nor is that home as it was, because they, and we, have changed.

Perhaps the most searching question in this rich, wonderful, mysterious story is this: who would have figured that pagans from Persia would come to the Holy Land to show the people of the Covenant what God is doing in their midst? These characters could not be more removed from the Jewish Citizenry in Jerusalem" in heritage and outlook. And yet God uses them" neither Jew nor Christian" to show that the Light has come. And the "king" is found not in the seat of power in Jerusalem, but a few miles away as the crow flies, in the humility and relative poverty of Bethlehem. And what do we know of this Light? The poet and prophet Isaiah wrote: The Light has come to dispel the darkness that had covered the earth and all its people. Indeed, the Epiphany we observe today reminds us that the life of faith is a life on the journey toward seeking, accepting, and acknowledging the gift of light that God has freely bestowed upon us. That light is not simply something we marvel at and observe, it becomes part of us. As Isaiah wrote, "you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you." Like the wise men that came before us, we are those people who search for signs of hope and reconciliation and find that search to have led us here, to this place and time. Like Isaiah, we are those people who imagine that one day we shall arise and be radiant lights. Perhaps that time is now, amidst the ordinary and mundane.

The theologian Gabriel Marcel told the story of sitting in a village café in the German Alps, just at dusk. On a hillside road in the distance, in the growing darkness, the village lamplighter moved slowly up the hill, lighting each lamp as he walked. Marcel could not actually see the lamplighter, only the light he left as he walked up the hill above the village. In just this way, he later wrote, God's gifts to us illumine the darkness and make a path for others to follow. And we can do likewise. Who among us, after all, has not been led by just such a light, perhaps even someone we never met or knew? Because a stranger he would never see lit the way, Marcel was moved to consider the light in a new way. Because strangers in a far off country once searched the heavens for a sign, and followed that sign, we know something new of the light that darkness cannot overcome.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote a wonderful and little-known poem entitled "For the Time Being," in which he suggests that Christmas has more to do with the confrontation of the emptiness in late winter than with holiday festivities in December. As we move from the Christmas season into Epiphany this seems a cautionary" and deeply honest" reading. Curiously, Auden uses humor to make his point, suggesting that honest moral reflection occurs often in the presence of our ability to laugh at our human finitude, vulnerability, and foibles. Indeed, somewhere between Jerusalem with its narcissistic self-righteousness, manifest in the form of Herod, and the humility and even comedy of the scene in Bethlehem, Christ meets us where we live most of our lives. Even Auden's title, For the Time Being, evokes, as William French suggests, the period in which we all live, the flat stretches of our lives: Our time; Home; The day-to-day world which never quite measures up to the Christian ideals or Hollywood portrayals." 1 "Now we must dismantle the tree," Auden writes, "putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes, some have got broken, and carrying them up to the attic, we have attempted quite unsuccessfully to love all our relatives, and in general grossly overestimated our powers, 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, 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." 2 For Auden, the "Time Being is the most trying time of all." It is precisely the ordinary time in which we all live that is redeemed by Emmanuel, God among us.

My sisters and brothers, it is our moral obligation as Christians to be co-participants in the good but difficult work of redeeming today, here, now, this moment, with grace, humility, gratitude, and humor. This is the Incarnation, and in Auden's poem it is mediated through humor, and humility, amidst the "Divine redemption of the mundane." 3 It is in our brokenness and finitude that the Word Made Flesh graces us. We see the truth of Reinhold Niebuhr's observation that "Humor is the prelude to faith" "laughter is the beginning of prayer." Humor reminds us of the mysterious, delightful surprise that the Divine Word would appear in history as a baby in a Bethlehem manger. In this sense, laughter, humor, and humility have the power to transcend the narcissistic egoism of Herod" "and of ourselves. The self-deception that masks our anxiety and fear can be transcended by such virtues, and this reminds us that human finitude is just fine" "indeed, it is where God seeks us out and finds us. It reminds us that for The Time Being, God comes to us precisely in those moments when we are most human, most fully ourselves, most vulnerable, most mundane, and redeems the everydayness. For the Time Being, the light of which the poet Isaiah speaks is bountiful plenty to say grace over. For the Time Being, we can choose the good wisdom to seek the "lightness" of humor, humility, and gratitude in the ordinary, grace-filled moments of our lives, as we enter this season of Epiphany. Perhaps in those moments we may live into our Baptismal covenant of wisdom, courage, perseverance, and joy and wonder in the day to day. This is a form of quiet moral courage and heroism" "a kind of "lightness of being," that is not the stuff of an anxious, fearful, narcissistic Herod, but rather of a baby lying in a manger, miles from Jerusalem who is, unexpectedly, incredibly, Emmanuel God among us. For the Time Being perhaps that is more than enough. Amen.

1 William F. French, "Auden's Moral Comedy: A Later Winter Reading, The Christian Century.

2 W. H. Auden, "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio."

3 French, p. 7.

Comments? Contact Bill Harkins at: BHarkins@stphilipscathedral.org