
Following The Star

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Christmas II - Lessons for Epiphany
Matthew 2:1-12

My hometown parish observes an old tradition of beginning the season of Epiphany with a pageant, much like the one we have on Christmas Eve, it is called the Feast of Lights. The service is held on Epiphany - or the Sunday prior to Jan. 6th - I have memories of the church still smelling of Christmas greenery, of oranges and apples on boxwood wreaths hanging in the windows, of the lingering aroma of incense from Christmas midnight mass. Crowded into the dimly lit church are the proud beaming faces of parents and grandparents. Friends and neighbors from local churches come out to support the kids and, maybe out of curiosity. It is the night to sing the last Christmas Carols of the year and the first hymns of Epiphany. The Feast of Lights is really the culminating event of the season, ..the counter-point of the lighting of the first candle of Advent.

Because we were a small Episcopal parish in the rural South, friends from First Methodist and the Roman Catholic Church joined the children and youth of Grace Church, to fill in our small numbers. In the Feast of Lights there are the usual cast of characters; shepherds and innkeepers, Mary and Joseph, King Herod, singing angels - one angel with a large star, narrators, and of course, the Magi - the central characters of the Epiphany. I have to confess that I coveted being cast in the role of a Magi, but inevitably I was cast as a member of the choir or a shepherd or Joseph - never a wise man.

The distinctive feature in the service that gives the Feast of Lights its name is the special candle-holder placed on the altar. About 4 feet long, it holds 15 candles. As the narrators present each segment of the story and the cast act out their roles, the candles are lit one by one, casting golden light throughout the darkened chancel. As a kid I was captivated by the large star held over the Holy Family. Made of cardboard and covered with crinkled gold foil, it grew brighter at the lighting of each candle as their flickering flames danced off the star. Gazing on the star I wondered about the courage it took for the wise men to follow a star with unswerving devotion into the unknown.

You already know the climax of the story, the arrival of the three kings - they join the shepherds and, surrounded by angels, kneel at the manger under the star, gazing at the revelation of God's love in the face of the Christ child. At this point in the pageant, tapers are passed to light the candles of pageant participants and the congregation. In response to the good news of the savior's birth, the whole congregation follows the star, processing out of the church and around the block singing a hymn. In the deep darkness of the night, the gold foil star radiates the light of the many candles carried around it. And the voices lifted in song, are calling the world to pay attention to the God who comes among us in the flesh of a child. I treasure my memories of participating in the pageants and carrying candles into the cool South Georgia night.

What we are called to celebrate in the Epiphany is the manifestation, the revelation, of Jesus to the world. The light of the star shines on the human family. And in God's taking on human flesh God's love is offered to everyone made in the divine

image. Whatever we call them, kings, magi, or wise men they are symbols of the good news that Jesus comes to redeem everyone - Jew and gentile. No longer is a specific heritage or birthright required to belong to the community of God.

When the new star's light is observed by the Magi they believe it is a herald of a new revelation. "For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." (Matthew 2:2) I think it is true that revelations almost always lead those who receive them on a journey, and this star leads the Magi to unexpected places. But who are the Magi? We sing of them as the three kings, refer to them as wise men, but we actually know very little about them, we don't even know the number of them who made the journey to Bethlehem. The word in Matthew's gospel has several meanings; it is likely the magi are similar to some of the people who exist on the fringes of small towns or less desirable parts of cities. You know the ones who hang signs telling of their ability to read palms, taro cards and tea-leaves, fortune tellers and astrologers. The only thing we really know for sure is that these Magi were star gazers. Their willingness to search for signs in the heavens leaves them open to following a new star.

Maybe this new star was brighter, more beautiful or brilliant than the rest - something about it stirs them and changes them from star gazers to seekers. Whether they understood it fully or not, the star is leading them to another revelation which outshines the star, a revelation of something new and wonderful that God is doing for the whole creation. As they follow the star they become part of the unfolding drama of Jesus' incarnation, they are heralds of God's new activity in the world.

And where do the Magi find the incarnation? Not where they imagined, in Jerusalem under the care of King Herod and at the center of political and religious authority for Israel. Rather, the light of the star leads the Magi to Bethlehem to find the savior. In Bethlehem, the star does not cast its rays on a palace, the Magi find no royal prince but a poor, helpless child. In spite of the meager surroundings, the Magi recognize the lowly-born infant as the prince of peace.

The stories of Christmas and Epiphany show God's radical and unconventional way of loving us. God becomes flesh in the womb of a young peasant girl. God is born in poverty and in a shelter for animals. God chooses shepherds to receive the angel's song of praise. God chooses those who are outside the religious and institutional structures of Israel to announce the beginning of a new kingdom.

The light of the star does not always show us the expected or the welcome. As the story shows, it shines on the deep divisions that separate the human family; the powerful and the powerless, the rich and the poor, the learned and the simple, the insiders and the outsiders, God establishes his reign in the margins of society to begin the reconciliation and healing of the world. But this has been the way of God from the beginning.

It is an aged Abraham who is called to be the father of a great nation that will enlighten humankind with the knowledge of God. In the covenant God makes with Moses and Israel the care for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the resident alien is an obligation for every person in the community. The Prophets call generation after generation of Israelites to remember that they are chosen to care for the poor and oppressed. It is somehow appropriate that a star shines over a small village in rural Judea, calling people from inside and outside Israel into relationship with one another and God.

I don't think it really matters if pageants are held on Christmas Eve or the Feast of the Epiphany, what is more important is that the story is told year after year. With each telling the opportunity is given for each of us to seek Jesus in the stable, under the light of the star to find our places and to kneel in cow dung and hay, to brush our shoulders with hardworking peasant shepherds and travel weary Magi, to cast our gaze on the face of an infant who is the Lord of life - the King of Glory.

But what do we do when the brush of angel's wings is silent, when the night sky is empty of song, when the shepherds return to their flocks on the hills, and the wise men have gone home by another road? How will we tell the story once we have risen from our knees? Where will the revelation take us and will it be strong enough to sustain us in that place where it leads?

Though the star is now one among many, the light of revelation continues to shine; it comes to us in word and sacrament, in community and prayer, and love of one another. Week after week Jesus comes to us in the Holy Eucharist; we cradle him in our hands and taste him in bits of bread and sips of wine that nourish us to be his followers in the world. Jesus says

to his disciples, "You are the light of the world, let your light shine before others."

My sisters and brothers, through baptism and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit we bear Jesus in our very bodies; we are living, breathing sacraments that make Christ manifest in the world. Whether we process out into the dark, Georgia night in an Epiphany procession or onto Peachtree Road in Atlanta from our weekly Eucharistic celebrations, we bear Jesus into the world. We take Jesus into our families, our schools, our workplaces. We take Jesus into hospitals and nursing homes, into hospices and homeless shelters, to those who struggle to find love and acceptance, who want to escape loneliness, to those who are considered insiders and those who are outsiders. And if we are willing to be seekers, then wherever we take Jesus we will find Jesus already there. As the Christmas season comes to an end with the Epiphany, the star shines not in the sky but in our hearts and our work of bearing Jesus and meeting Jesus in the world is just beginning. Amen.

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