

“FOLLOWING THE LIGHT”

Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12

Blessed Epiphany! It doesn't have the familiarity as Merry Christmas to those of us from the Western Christian faith tradition. In the early church there were two pivotal seasons of the year, Easter and Epiphany, which focused on the people of light at the beginning and the end of the life of Christ. Epiphany incorporated Advent and Christmas and there were many baptisms to extend the light to new believers. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning divine manifestation, the Christian Feast of Lights that celebrates the “shining forth” or revelation of God to all people in Jesus Christ. Today is the 12th day of Christmas and in many churches the Magi or Wise Men come forward at the beginning of the worship service and offer their gifts to the Christ child.

In this Epiphany season to Ash Wednesday, there is the possibility for each one of us to have an encounter with the sacred. In this season of darkness and shadows, we are reminded by Fr. Alfred Delp in his Prison Meditations, “Darkness shall not frighten us or distress wear us out; we will go on waiting, watching and praying until the star rises.” Isaiah prophesied that the light had come after the exile, a long time of darkness for the Hebrew people. Indeed, the vision Isaiah shared spanned much darkness in Israel's experience. They were an oppressed and exploited people, forced from their homeland and temple into exile. They were disobedient and not faithful yet they still belonged to God. The prophet Isaiah prophesied that Israel is to live in the glow of God's glory and be a presence of light in the world.

The story of the visit of the Wise Men is retold on Epiphany Sunday. Luke's Gospel account tells of the shepherds and the angels but Matthew writes an account of the Magi, thought to be priestly sages from Persia who were astrologers and interpreters of dreams. If you want to get a visual of Epiphany I recommend you checking out The Nativity, a new commercial film that follows the scriptures and what is known about the birth of Jesus. Better yet, you might take a trip to the Holy Land and visit the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the Palestinian West Bank to see for yourself. I remember well how I waited in long lines with uptight Greek Orthodox priests trying to control the crowd as we were pressed and pushed. I was one of the last ones who just made the cutoff before the church closed for the day to see the place where Jesus is believed to have been born. I was moved deeply by the sight. It seemed realistic to me from what I have read about it and then the visits to the caves on the outskirts of Bethlehem near where the shepherds kept their flocks gave me another picture. I tried to envision the star overhead shining down on the Christ child, that I might experience this light revealing God's glory which the darkness cannot overcome.

My interest in this story has to do with the Wise Men (legend has them as three: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar). They are not Jews and they came from afar. Why did they search for the baby born king of the Jews? Was it because they believed him a portent of another power come to earth? What was it that led them to risk their lives to follow a star in the East; to pay attention to the prophet Micah who prophesied that “from Bethlehem is to come a ruler who is to shepherd (God's) people, Israel?” I want to know about their inner life, their spiritual orientation and sense of the divine that guided and led them to follow the light to where it stopped. And then for them to be so overwhelmed with joy, to pay the baby Jesus homage, to kneel and worship and offer their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. What was going on within for these Magi to make this leap of faith and allow themselves to be transformed in the Light of God's Peace and Love? Megan McKenna suggests that “stars, angels and dreams are pieces of the same reality, that they are all messages from God, shreds of glory loose on earth, invitations to closeness to divinity.” The story continues after their encounter with Herod and visit with the Christ child. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so they left for their own country by another road. Another road, another way.

In reading the history of our congregation published for the 175th anniversary I came across some excerpts of sermons by a lay preacher, John C. Gardiner, a farmer who joined the church in 1911. He shares an experience of light that he had right here. “Many years ago, the Northern Lights were putting on a display in the heavens in this part of the state the likes of which we haven't seen since. The heavens were literally aflame with the lifting, shifting fire, red, yellow and green. My wife and I and a guest in our house went out under the shelter of the trees that we might see this display in heaven....Now these lights were not only to the north of us. They seemed to be all around us and we literally stood within a dome of lifting, shifting fire and as the clouds drifted within that dome of fire, they formed the fleecy wings of angels for the likeness of God himself in heaven. Now, you know and I know the aurora borealis is a phenomena of nature, only partially understood by

humans. But that night, there were three that stood in the fire and saw a fourth, like unto the son of God.” He concludes, “I know now that there is some communication between God and humans that has gone on since the beginning of time. I don’t know how it works but I know it is there. Jesus is saying to you and to me, “Look about you and see. Look up, the heavens declare The Glory of God The firmament shoeth his handiwork.” John C. Gardiner, parishioner of this church shared he didn’t get his faith by placing his hand upon the Bible and saying he believed every word nor by some blinding light out of heaven but by an experience of the son of the living God walking with him. He was transformed in his epiphany experience and took another road which gave him a sense of the way of the cross, life for all, justice shared.

My question for you to ponder is do you have the openness to take another road, a road less traveled? Can you venture beyond the borders and barriers of your world view and comfort zones to follow the star, calling you to new life in Christ, the light of the world? There is the story of a passenger sitting relaxed on an airplane. A man appeared with a parachute. He asked the passenger, “Would you like to join me?” “No thank you,” said the passenger, “I am very happy where I am.” The reply came back, “Do as you like, but I’m the pilot.” Our darkness and shadows in our time are certainly real for us and often overwhelming. I liken it to a tunnel experience. The Buffalo News on New Year’s Day had these headlines in the year in review, “A Shocking and Dramatic Year: There Was Little in the News Around the World to Reassure Us.” We want to hide in the shadows. Violence and unrest are everywhere, globally, nationally, locally. We fear perceived threats from those who are different than ourselves. We fear real threats from terrorists and rogue nations. We find ourselves having to deal with our own broken and strained relationships, our failing health, our shrinking financial resources, employment that pays a living wage, is stable and meaningful, facing our rapidly changing society and its impact on us, worrying about our loved ones, our kids, our parents, those we care about that are close to us. I encourage you to keep watch for the light at the end of the tunnel. It is for us to be open to the Spirit as we watch for the signs; signs of radiance in the world which might be in unlikely faces and places. For it is here that our journey prayerfully begins. The mystic Laurence Freeman reminds us that, “prayer is about seeking God in the stillness beyond words and thought. It is about awakening to the presence of God within us.” Epiphany calls us and challenges us to follow the light which illuminates our conscience and our Christian way of life. May our faith be deepened and expanded this Epiphany season.