

Still on a Journey

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 6, 2019—Epiphany

- Psalm 72:11-19 (Good News Translation) ¹⁸ Praise the LORD, the God of Israel! He alone does these wonderful things. ¹⁹ Praise his glorious name forever! May his glory fill the whole world. Amen! Amen!
- Matthew 2:1-12 ¹¹ They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him. ¹² Then they returned to their country by another road, since God had warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Epiphany is an encouragement to continue our journey as people changed by God's incarnation in Jesus.

Christmas we understand: Jesus was born into our world.

Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter we get: Jesus entered Jerusalem; he was crucified, died, and was buried; he was raised from death to life.

Even Pentecost we understand... kinda: in a supernatural display of fire and wind the Risen Christ's followers discovered that they were empowered by God's Holy Spirit to boldly proclaim their faith by what they did and said.

But Epiphany... well, the meaning of that holy day doesn't always seem so clear.

The word "epiphany" is not totally unknown to us. In the English language we use the Greek word "epiphany" to refer to someone experiencing a "flash of insight."¹ That comes from its original sense which means the appearance or manifestation of a deity. In the Christian tradition God's incarnation in the birth of Jesus was the appearance or manifestation of the divine presence in our world.

Epiphany is the twelfth day after Christmas, so it functions as a sort of formal end to the Christmas season. Eastern Orthodox Christians see Epiphany as the real "Christmas Eve" with Jesus having been born on what would be January 7th. But many Christian traditions (including ours) designate Epiphany as a commemoration of the visit by the Wise Men to the Holy Family.

When your baby is born, you can expect to receive a lot of visitors: proud grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbors, friends. In the Christian tradition, what was significant about the Wise Men was not that they visited the family of a newborn. What marked this as unique was *why* they were motivated to visit a family living far, far away to whom they had no connection.

It never hurts to be reminded that we don't know how many Wise Men there were in this party; the Bible doesn't specify. The tradition that they were three in number arises simply because they presented three gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh. Nor does the Bible say that they were kings, nor does it give their names. The tradition which gave them the names Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar comes from a 6th century mosaic in Ravenna (Italy, not Ohio).² They often are referred to as "Magi" which is a Persian word referring to their place in their society's priestly class; we get the words "magic" and "magician" from that.

In society's priestly class, then, these were men of means who enjoyed the luxury of being able to spend their time studying the world around them to discern signs and omens and portents of

¹ Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, Michael Agnes, ed. Cleveland, Ohio: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2007

² <https://dwrightlongenecker.com/caspar-balthasar-and-melchior-where-did-that-come-from/> accessed 1/3/2019

things to come. They engaged in astronomy – the study of celestial objects – and combined that with astrology – the conviction that the position of planets and stars and moons can affect human affairs.

Possibly at their daily meeting at a local coffee shop they compared notes and realized that they all had discerned the same thing: the position of a certain star in the heavens said to them that a future king was to be born. (The Greek words meaning “a star in the East” can also mean “a star at its rising,” since as the earth rotates, stars “rise” in the east and proceed toward the western horizon.) They felt drawn to explore this promising development and set out westward.

When they arrived in Jerusalem the tradition of Jewish prophecy had to be explained to them, foreigners that they were. Herod sent them to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the revered King David, where they were able to locate Mary and her son in the house they were then living in. But the story of the Magi doesn’t end with them paying tribute to Jesus the Child-Born-to-Kingship. Those wise men picked up on Herod’s insecurity and vengeful temperament. Whether from revelation through a dream or from their gut instinct, they realized their homeward trip should go nowhere near Jerusalem and Herod. They went home by another way.

What can we take from the experience of the Magi? For them it was not enough simply to know that a new king was born. They had to seek him out themselves. They had to humble themselves before him. What’s more, when it was time for them to move on, they resolved that they would not simply retrace their steps. Having encountered the Son of God in Jesus, they had been changed, they were different, and consequently their lives needed to be different, too. They had to go on their way by a different way.

Christmas can change us, too. Yes, the parties of Christmas were fun. The gifts exchanged at Christmas brought delight and joy. We remembered loved ones unable to join our festivities. Reading the news in Christmas cards evoked memories and strengthened bonds of friendship. Even coming together for worship on Christmas Eve gave comfort, affirmation, gentle joy, encouraging hope. Our celebration of Christmas affected us.

And now on this twelfth day of Christmas, when we have beheld God in human form – now that we know God is with us because Jesus has been born into our world – we don’t simply go on as before, as if nothing has changed. The shepherds went back to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. The Wise Men sought out and worshipped and gave gifts to the child. Through our experiences rooted in those biblical stories we, too, can have an “Epiphany” moment, a sudden flash of insight. How does God-with-us invite us to *be* different in order to *make* a difference?

- Perhaps we can risk offering forgiveness to that person who embarrassed or scarred us so deeply.
- We might resolve to show more patience when we experience inconveniences or when we engage with persons whose views differ from ours.
- We can advocate for former prisoners or persons with mental illness or people suffering discrimination based on their ethnicity or religion or orientation or other people-at-risk who don’t have the voice or influence or access we have.
- We can reach out to an unfamiliar face in this very room and extend a word of welcome.
- We can reach out to a familiar face in our lives and extend an invitation to join us in worship.
- We can surprise someone with an unexpected, generous gift (and surprise ourselves in discovering our capacity to be generous).
- We can resolve to make a small, simple change in how we live so that we can, in turn, share a blessing with a person or an organization that desperately needs it.

This day called Epiphany may bring our Christmas observances to a close, yet the work of Christmas begins. Like the Magi who went away changed, Epiphany invites us to continue our journey as people changed by God’s incarnation in Jesus, born long ago in Bethlehem, alive in us today to guide how we think, the words we say, and the actions we choose.