

Epiphany: The Magi
Text: Matthew 2:1-12
1.8.17



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Can you recall a time in your own life when God used some ‘unacceptable’ means of revealing himself to you? Why have you become so convinced that God ‘wouldn’t do that?’”

“How might God be at work outside of the boundaries of your own personal creed? Do you ever find yourself feeling threatened by another’s search? Prone to corrective action?”

“Who have you dismissed as ‘un-interested’? What significant discoveries have you made in your own journey when you weren’t even looking?”

“In what ways do you believe that your faith is becoming stationary? Motionless? How have you seen your faith moving you into the places of brokenness and spiritual curiosity around you?”

Teaching Notes...

As we have journeyed through Advent, we have been reminded ...

... that ours is decidedly a “*salvation story*” into which we are invited to participate. At times, the saving action of God provides specific instruction and evokes an intentional response (e.g. build a boat, break a lamp, walk around a city, go to Bethlehem). At other times, we are prompted toward a less format-able form of saving activity--- “*standing still*”.

... that in the process, there will be a lot of “*How can this be’s?*” and “*How will I know’s?*” and there will be significant stretches of time when nothing remotely resembling salvation is taking place. Those times will require a conviction to “persevere” [live “*by means of the truth*”].

... of humanity’s desire for God to show up--- to reveal himself; to confirm their suspicions that they are not alone and that there is something “*more*”. It’s a desire for him to come as light in our darkness, as hope in our fear, as confidence in our insecurities and uncertainties, as life in our death. It invites and necessitates a search... but **not simply us searching for God, but God searching for us!**

In an approach to faith that enlists the directives of the “Church Year” (calendar), today is recognized as “**Epiphany**”.

In common usage, it’s a figure of speech (“*I had an epiphany*”), we utilize to describe an “*ah-ha*” moment, which is another figure of speech that we use to describe ***an awakening; a revealing***; an instance where we are suddenly aware of what’s going on around us which had previously been

undetected, but now lends a broader meaning to things. Often, those moments of discovery have life-altering significance.

When capitalized, it refers to the church's commemoration of the journey of the **Magi**.

My understanding of the wise men involved (3) ornately-costumed guys on camel-back who make their way to see Jesus, via some cosmic GPS system. They kneel, drop off their gifts (with the appropriate gift-receipts, should Joe and Mary decide that they would like to take back that "*special something*") and very covertly return to their homeland, via an alternate route ("re-routing"). We were always cautioned about the heresy involved in having the magi actually displayed at the nativity scene.

"**magi**" (translated, 'wise men', in Eng.); a word from which we get our word 'magician'. These were not backyard, birthday party, pour milk into your hat, cut a Centurion in half, animal balloon magicians.

These are the ones who were responsible for determining the correlation between what was going on cosmically (in the "heavens"; realm of the gods) and how that was effecting life on this terrestrial ball. They were looking to make the connection between the "seen" and the "unseen" (2 Corinthians 4:18). They were astrologers. They were seekers.

Politicians, Priests and Pagans

Herod: so intent, is he, on preserving his own territory and kingdom that any talk of another king automatically poses a threat. He's worked hard at establishing himself. He's leveraged his way to the top. He's not about to be undermined by some peasant, Jewish boy.

Priests: did you notice how adept they were at Bible Trivia? ("Where is the King to be born?")
"You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me so that I can give you this eternal life". John 5:37-40

It is tragic when our tidy accumulation of God-facts neither evokes a spiritual hunger nor repentance.

Magi: they are the "outliers" [distanced; classed differently] in the story. They come from "the East". This is sacred, not literal, geography. What matters most for Matthew is that they were Gentiles--- those from 'the nations' who are drawn to the light of Jesus and join to worship... find themselves now participating in the Story, which has been God's desire, all along (Genesis 12).

As an aside...

Did you notice the journey they took in their discovery of God?

They **first** encounter the revelation of creation---- something of 'otherness' which initiates their quest.

Psalms 19:1-4 *"The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world".*

Paul says, in Romans 1, that to "not notice" is inexcusable. It also seems to reinforce, somehow, the determination of a godless culture to keep us distracted; to ensure that we are entertained.

Then, upon arriving in Jerusalem, they are exposed to the ancient writings of Scripture for clues because they are searching to find out what all of this really means.

Finally, they arrive at the incarnation--- at Jesus.

Epiphany says that God is so determined to reveal himself that he will honor, at times, a misguided pursuit in order to re-direct humanity toward the truth.

The story reminds us we should be cautioned about the definitive nature of our declarations as it involves the means and methods in which God brings people to himself. Grace is much more extravagant and indiscriminate than we dare to admit (Jesus was always loving all the wrong people for all of the right reasons!) and God's sovereignty means that he has every resource at his disposal and there is no end to the imaginative and creative expressions of his grace.

Epiphany suggests that the objective is not simply the "search". Seeking is about finding.

"... it went ahead of them and the star stopped over the place where the child was" (9).

Interestingly, the star stopped over Jesus. The search culminates in Jesus.

We live in a culture that validates the "universal search", which suggests that the end is not as important as the means. I find that it makes us, at times, increasingly hesitant to make truth claims: to say that we have found, in Jesus, all that it means to be fully human... all that our heart's desire.

God doesn't say, *"If you seek me, I'll provide enough stimulation and intrigue to sustain your tireless efforts"*. He says, *"If you look for me, wholeheartedly, you will find me"* (Jeremiah 29:14). *"Ask, and you will receive. Seek and you will find..."* Matthew 7

To say that *"all paths lead to God"* sounds wonderfully "PC", but, to me, frighteningly vague. When it comes to essential life-questions, the answer cannot be "D... all of the above". Let me also say that although I believe that such ambiguity is not the answer, neither is arrogance or harsh judgmentalism.

Our posture toward seekers...

Honor the other's quest. Trust that their journey is not a denial of God, but indicative of a sincere search for him.

Sometimes, amidst all that we would classify as 'ungodly' and 'foolish', is a sincere desire/hunger for truth (Acts 17). Don't be afraid that honoring their search is some indiscriminate approval of the path.

The instant we begin to feel threatened by the nature of another's search, we move toward regaining control and lose our ability to love them well.

Don't be so quick to label their hesitancy as "resistance", but a desire to make the best choice possible. We wore rejection as a badge of honor. Perhaps it was because we were simply unattractive and obnoxious!

Sometimes God comes to us when we aren't even looking.

"I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, 'Here am I, here am I.'" [Isaiah 65:1] God seeking to get OUR attention!?

Invite another to explore the mysteries of God with you.

Honest interaction with another (where both are engaged and respectful and empathetic) is increasingly difficult, in our culture, because we are terminally “partisan”, we typically “post” our opinions rather than honestly discuss them, and we assume that being loving means indiscriminate approval of another’s perspective.

In an era where the religious landscape is changing at such a rapid pace and creating even more ambiguity than clarity, it is easy for Christianity to become nostalgic or condemning. The Spirit seems to be inviting us *alongside the chariot* (Philip and the Ethiopian official: Acts 8:26-40)... to be aware of the curiosity of another and moving with them in our journey.

Know that, with Christianity, the “goal” is the “means”. Trust that our culture will know truth when they see it.

Jesus’ assertion was that as we are able to abandon the self-directed life (life with us as the point of reference) and receive life and learn life from him, we would be “blessed”. We would flourish. We would become the humans we were meant to be. Christianity’s contention is that faith, when it is done “right” (in the ways of Jesus) is good for the world.

It’s not only our desire is to see people immersed into the community of Jesus, but realizing that the community itself often becomes the means by which most will enter.

Biblically, Christian faith has never been a static location, but a spiritual journey (“leave”, “go”, “enter”). Christianity is always at its best, not when it is ‘hunkered down’ (dug in), but when it is moving us someplace; when it is a catalyst for change and not simply a way of securing our position.