

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

January 10, 2010 Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:1-12

Beyond the Star / Beyond the Signs

Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. The word “epiphany” has two key meanings or understandings. First, an “epiphany” is a sudden realization, usually triggered by a unique occurrence or situation. Simply, it is the moment when the light bulb turns on inside our heads. (“Light dawns on Marblehead!”)

The second type of “epiphany” is the manifestation of God. The word epiphany literally means “to manifest or display,” and comes from *epi-* “on, to” + *phainein* “to show” (the same root as our word *fantastic* comes from).

And the symbol for Epiphany is the star.

There are a number of epiphanies in our familiar story this morning. Herod has an epiphany when he realizes that he is dealing with something much greater than he can handle.

The wise men have an epiphany when they realize that Herod is only out for his own political power and not to be trusted. And there is the epiphany moment when the wise men find themselves in the presence of the Christ child.

We read this story every year on the 2nd Sunday in January and this year I want to focus on the wise men and the star or the sign, which guides their journey to Jesus.

The magi – and that is the Greek word – are foreigners, from the east. Somewhere along the way they were elevated to Wise Men, although I think this is a dubious title, since they had to stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions – which could make us ask, “were they even men?”

At any rate – they were magi from the east – the Far East – which is important to the story – and they were definitely not Jewish. We know this because as they came to Jerusalem to ask for directions to find Jesus, they refer to him as the King of the Jews and indicate that they want to worship him. Jews were waiting for the Messiah – not a king – which is how the Jewish scribes and leaders refer to him (here and elsewhere). Also, Jews would never worship a King – David, Solomon were never worshiped. For Jews, worship was reserved for God and God alone.

The magi (from which we get the word magic) were probably astrologer / astronomers – what we have two words for they only had one – magi. There was no separating science from the supernatural. What was happening in the natural world could ONLY be explained by a belief system of gods, goddesses and supernatural powers.

Matthew is making a point with this detail – an important point – not just for the story, but for our faith as well. Because by making them clearly not Jewish, but from another country and race,

he is signaling that the Christ child is for ALL people. It doesn't matter where you come from or where you've been – Christ came for you and you will find him.

Back to the story: They follow the star.

The star is the wise men's compass, their map, their gps; it is a sign pointing them to their destination. They wouldn't have gotten to their destination without it!

You know, I think we're a lot like the wise men – we'd like a clear star to guide us. I often hear from people that they want / need a sign to point them in the right direction. We seem to need to see and hear from God in significant ways.

I wonder about that – why? Why do we need these signs?

I heard something this week I've never heard before as I thought about this.

Signs are for unbelievers

Prophecy is for believers

Signs – when God's work and words are mediated through something – like the star or the angels – are for those who don't believe.

Prophecy – when God speaks directly – his word is unmediated and goes straight to your mind and heart – is for those who already do believe.

Let's unpack that! And to do that I need to introduce another chapter in the Christmas story that we didn't get to read this year. (It only comes up in the lectionary, which is the 3-year schedule of Bible readings for Sunday, once in three years – It is assigned for next year, the Sunday after Christmas) The story is in Luke and it comes right after the shepherds return to their fields praising God.

In reality it happens 8 days after Jesus is born, when Mary and Joseph take him to the temple to be circumcised. While there, they meet two people, Simeon and Anna, who are both devout Jews. Anna, whose husband had died after only 7 years of marriage and is now 84 years old, never left the temple – she prayed and worshipped all the time.

Well, when Mary and Joseph show up with Jesus, neither Simeon nor Anna get a sign telling them who has arrived. They just know who this is. The story does tell us that the Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he'd see the Messiah before he died and that that day the Holy Spirit told him to go to the temple.

But no signs, just “go to the temple.”

Anna and Simeon are believers, they are of the faith (Jewish faith) and in the community. They don't need signs; they get the word directly and with confidence they know who is before them.

Contrast this with our wise men – who are Persian – NOT Jews – not believers. How on earth (literally on earth) is God going to get them to know that his Son has been born. As outsiders to the faith, the traditions and cultures of Middle East Jewish life, they do need a sign.

And one they can read – the stars!!!!

But what I love about this story is not so much the star / the sign; but what happens beyond the star.

Because eventually the star stops leading them – and they arrive! You know that feeling when you finally get there? Some of you did some long driving over Christmas.... Some of you braved the airports.... You know that feeling when you finally get there, when the car is unloaded and the bags are in your room. Ahh...

At the Church Council this week we talked about journeys and destinations – that sometimes the destination is a zillion times worth the journey. (That may or may not apply to your recent Christmas travels.... But hopefully you have experienced times when this is true.) We thought of examples such as graduating and having a baby.

The destination is a zillion times worth the journey.

This certainly applies to our wise men today. Their journey was long and hard – it could have taken as long as 2 years, over rugged territory and through dangerous lands. And as arduous as the journey was, the destination was a zillion times worth the journey.

Because the King of the Jews was where they were headed.

The Son of God

The Prince of Peace

The Savior of the nations

The Lord of the universe

When you get beyond the star, beyond the signs – look what you'll find! The sign is never the thing, a sign by definition is always pointing to something else. Because, when you get beyond the star you get the real thing.

God in the flesh – Jesus.

I know we crave the signs – but this morning I'd say – don't put all your efforts in the stars – start the journey, even though you might not know the roads. Stop and ask for directions (which is what wise MEN do...)

Listen to advice from others, pay attention to your dreams, discern the information together in community.

But never lose sight of the destination – Jesus Christ – a personal relationship with him as well as a communal / corporate relationship with him as a church as we manifest (there's that word again) his body here on earth.

I pray that as we move from Christmas through Epiphany toward Lent, Good Friday and Easter that you will know Jesus' presence; that you will believe that not only has God sent His Son to Earth, but that God Himself has come to you, personally and to us a church.

Want to have a deeper faith? Stop looking for signs and start looking for Jesus! Because while it's true that he has come to us, still we must also make a journey toward him. The Christian life is not to be lived alone – it's always in the plural – we; and it's always on the move; going and growing; changing around every turn. The church is not the historical society or the antiquarian society.

We ought never stay too long in the same place.

There is new life to be found, as we move beyond the stars.

There's a great prayer that I discovered when I was on sabbatical during the winter of '02-'03.
Will you pray it with me please:

Lord God,
you have called your servants
to ventures of which we cannot see the ending,
by paths as yet untrodden,
through perils unknown.
Give us faith to go out with good courage,
not knowing where we go,
but only that your hand is leading us
and your love supporting us;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
(Lutheran Book of Worship, 1978)