

The Magi's Journey
Matthew 2:1-12
January 5, 2020

We don't have vespers at our church; but many churches do. One United Methodist Church has evening services on Sunday. And this particular church has a big sign outside that you can change the information on it as needed. They advertise the sermon titles for each Sunday. One Sunday, it had the following sermon titles:

11:00 AM "Jesus Walking on the Water"

7:00 PM "Searching for Jesus"

There is a joke about the magi. It says, "If the magi were women..."

The joke goes like this:

"You know what would have happened if there had been three wise WOMEN instead of three wise MEN, don't you?"

The three wise WOMEN would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the Baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and given practical gifts."¹

But to be fair with the MEN, the Bible states this: "In the days of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" They asked for directions. I don't know about all others.

This weekend, as people put away all the Christmas stuff for another year, the Church begins to celebrate the season of Epiphany – the celebration of Christ as light of the world. Epiphany literally means "manifestation". The Feast of Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ's universal Lordship. It symbolizes Christ's Lordship being revealed to the magi, the wise men, who were gentiles.

The Apostolic Constitution (about AD 380), which is the largest collection of church law that survived from the early Church, instructs that we celebrate the Nativity on December 25th and Epiphany on January 6. However, not everyone has followed that tradition. Although we celebrate the birth of Christ on December

¹ <http://www.jokesoftheday.net/joke--If-the-Magi-Were-Women-/2016041215>

25th Armenian Church celebrates the Nativity on January 6th until now. The Church in Jerusalem celebrated the Nativity on January 6 until the year AD 549.²

In the 19th Century, John Hopkins Jr. wrote a hymn about the magi, identifying them as “three kings” from Orient. But the Bible does not say how many wise men came to Jesus. Neither does it mention them as kings. Based on the story in the Gospel of Matthew, the magi’s visit probably occurred sometime after Christ was born, possibly many months after. And they did not go to the stable or manger, they went to a house.³ Obviously, they did not arrive on the night when Christ was born.

Matthew says the wise men were from the East. They were educated men, who studied philosophy, medicine and natural science. They seemed to be familiar with the Isaiah’s prophecy.⁴ They were the seekers of the truth. They were the experts in astrology at the time when astrology was a respected science. They were foreigners with a foreign religion; but they were earnest seekers of the truth. They had a deep hunger for God. Then one day, they saw a sign in the sky, an unusually bright star. Seeing that sign in the sky, they took a journey without knowing the destination. That journey possibly took months. They just followed the sign.

On coming into the house, the magi saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. How did they know that this child was the Christ, the Messiah? What significance did the star in the sky have for them? How did the star lead them in their journey? How did they know upon which house the star actually stopped? During their travel, what kept them persistent in their journey? Was it the anticipation of meeting a king? Did they fully understand what they were about to encounter? The question could go on. But the record shows that they fell on their knees and worshipped the Christ Child.

What is worship? A former Arch Bishop of Canterbury, William Temple (1881-1944), once defined the act of worship as follows:

“To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, feed the mind with the truth of God, purge the imagination by the beauty of God,

² <http://www.churchyear.net/epiphany.html>

³ Matthew 2:11.

⁴ Isaiah 9:2-7.

open the heart to the love of God, and devote the will to the purpose of God.”⁵

Every generation, every race, every ethnicity has had people who searched for the truth. In fact, every human soul has a hunger for God. The question is “how do we find God?”

We will never know what kept the magi in their journey. One thing we know is that they have never stopped their search for the truth. And when they were in the presence of the Lord, they instinctively knew that they were in the presence of the divine. Their hearts were filled with joy. Their conscience was quickened by the holiness of God. A deep sense of reverence enveloped them. Their imagination was purified by the beauty of God. Their hearts were filled with awe and the love of God. They fell on their knees and worshiped him.

As they worshipped him, their will was devoted to the purpose of God. Although they were instructed by King Herod to find the Christ Child let him know where he was, they didn't follow that instruction. They went home by another way. Their will was given to the purpose of God rather than the purpose of a man.

Why do we come to church? For what purpose do we come to church? We come to church to be in the presence of God. We are here to encounter God and to worship him. Worship is more than the songs we sing. It is more than the ritual we participate. It is more than the sermons we endure. It is being in the presence of the God. And when our spirits are awakened to the presence of God true worship takes place.

The amazing discovery we have when we encounter the presence of God is that in all our searching for the Lord, the Lord himself has been seeking for us all along. We realize that we don't find God; but God finds us. One thing God demand of us is that we believe and trust him, and we put our lives into his hand.

The late Gordon Allport (1897-1967), a psychologist at Harvard University, who developed the original theory of personality, said that we are in the process of “becoming.” He discovered that all people are in the process of becoming either to be better or worse than they are. We are constantly changing. He concluded that all of us have a potential and ability to be more than we are.

⁵ Cited by J. Howard Olds in his sermon “When Is It Time to Seek Direction”, www.esermons.com.

The sad thing is that many people do not realize this. After Nathaniel Hawthorne died, some notebooks were found in his home. Hawthorne had written down many random ideas he had in these notebooks. One of the short entries reads as follows: “Suggestion for a story, story in which the principal character simply never appears.”

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg once commented about that. He said that too many people never discover, and never live out their potentials. “The principal character simply never appears. The person we might grow into, the human being we might become, doesn't show up. Our potential greatness lies unrealized, the splendor remains imprisoned, the promise unfulfilled. Our lives develop a static character.”⁶ That is sad isn't it?

Perhaps some of us feel that way. Perhaps we have never developed our physical and mental capability to the fullest. And it may be difficult for us to develop them anymore.

But your spiritual potential, the potential to become children of God has never diminished. You still have a potential for peace, a potential for joy, a potential for love and forgiveness, the potential which is greater than you can possibly imagine.

As we begin this New Year, let us remember that God constantly searches for us and is ready to make us greater than we are. Let us offer ourselves to the Lord, so that in this New Year we may be made better than before, and we may encounter God's presence each and every day.

⁶ Sidney Greenberg, [Say Yes to Life](#) (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1992), quoted by King Duncan in his sermon, “New Beginnings”, www.esermons.com.