

“OVERDUE FOR AN EPIPHANY?”

By Rev. Victor Kim

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

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For the longest time I didn't know that the song the Twelve Days of Christmas wasn't about the days before Christmas, like a countdown, but is actually about the days after Christmas. Today is actually the 4th day of Christmas, which we all know from the song as what?...

That's right, four calling birds! Calling birds, what in the world are calling birds?

They're probably black birds from the old English word for coal. In any event, I don't intend to go over the twelve days of Christmas with you, only to let you know that we are in the midst of the twelve days, which always end on January 6, which those of you who follow the church liturgical calendar know is Epiphany.

Since we won't be together on January 6, I thought I would take this morning and speak about Epiphany. Epiphany, sometimes called the Feast of the Epiphany, is most often associated with the visit of the 3 Wise Men, or Kings, or Magi, to the infant Jesus. The word epiphany, comes from the Greek word “epiphaneia,” means appearing or revealing, or revelation. In the Christian tradition it refers to the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If we were to be more precise about it, the self-revelation of God in Jesus, this epiphany, takes place in two parts, first in the visit of the Magi to Jesus and then on the following week in the liturgical calendar, which is the baptism of Jesus. In both texts, Jesus is presented as the revelation of God in human form, first witnessed to by the declaration and worship of the Magi, then in the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism declaring him to be God's Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

Epiphany is also part of the trajectory of the Advent-Christmas cycle. In the season of Advent we have prepared, hoped, longed for and anticipated the gift of Jesus. At Christmas that gift is received with unbounded joy and gladness. Now epiphany declares that the gift is not only for the Jews, but for the Gentiles. According to the gospel of Matthew, the first visitors to the infant Jesus are not Jews, but are travelers from the east, Persians; the word Magi is derived from Persian, probably from what is modern day Iran. They were most likely astrologers, priests of the cast of Zoroaster, well known in that time for their study of the stars.

There are some things about the Magi that should be cleared up, if they haven't been already. First of all, we don't know that there were only three of them, only that three gifts were presented to Jesus. We also have no biblical evidence that they rode camels, just as we don't have any biblical evidence that Mary rode a donkey to Bethlehem, and besides just imagine how uncomfortable that would have been for a pregnant woman! And those Christmas pageants with the Wise Men showing up with their gifts around the manger...all wrong! Mostly likely Jesus was closer to 2 years old when the Magi turned up at the door. But there is one thing I've always liked about the Magi. My favourite Christmas card is the one with the 3 Magi and the caption, "The Wise Still Seek Him," and I couldn't agree more.

But I wonder just how wise the so called Wise Men really were. The Magi saw a star which they believed symbolized a significant birth, the birth of the king of the Jews, and they followed that star to Jerusalem. There they inquired about where they might find this new born king. What sort of wise men drop into Jerusalem, where Herod reigned as king and ask him where the king of the Jews was born? This is the Herod who was so vicious, such a tyrant, that he murdered three of his own sons out of fear

they wanted his throne. He also had one of his wives killed and arranged for the slaughter of dozens of Jews on the day of his death so that there would be grieving among the people. Caesar was to have said that it would be better to be Herod's dog than his son. Why would you go into his palace and ask him where the king of the Jews was born? I mean you just don't do that kind of thing. Kings, particularly the despotic type, don't take too kindly to news of usurpers to their throne. It's like going into North Korea and asking Kim Jong Un where the true leader of the country is. But Herod plays it cool, feigning interest and asking the Magi to let him know when they had found the child, so that he too might go and pay him homage. Once the Magi are directed to Bethlehem, as the prophecy had foretold, they find the child, with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and worshiped him, offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for home by another road.

Maybe the story is too familiar; after all, we have institutionalized the visit of the wise men in every Christmas pageant, blurring the timing of their visit and the night of Jesus' birth. Because the story is so well known and loved, because the wise men are so familiar to us, **we risk losing the impact of the story, the shock and the scandal of what it says about God.** The Biblical story to this point has been centered on God's relationship with a particular people, the people of Israel. Through this people God chose to reveal God's nature and God's plan for salvation. **But throughout the story of God and God's people, there are always clear clues that God intends far more than just to save a people, God intends to save and renew all people, all creation.**

In the reading from the prophet Isaiah we hear about how the light has come

and the glory of the Lord is risen upon the people. Nations shall come to your light, says the prophet, and kings to the brightness of your dawn...a multitude of camels shall cover you...and all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. And of course, that broadness becomes explicitly clear in the New Testament, where we read from Paul's letter to the Ephesians, for example, that the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

We get that, its old news to us.

Of course, God's plan of salvation is all inclusive, of course, no one is exempt from those whom God desires to save. **And yet I wonder whether we truly hear, I wonder whether the good news is so familiar that it loses some of its power to astonish.**

If the good news is truly good, it must be good for all, not just for some, but do we believe that? I wonder whether we're overdue for an epiphany? I wonder whether we think that God's self-revelation in the gift of Jesus has been fully, completely and exhaustively comprehended by us, or whether it continues today in ways that still have power to astonish and surprise us? If we were to experience an epiphany today, what would that be like? What would it be like for you? For our congregations?

Now, you just can't force an epiphany to happen. It's been my experience that epiphanies take place, not on our terms, but always on God's. We can't force an epiphany, but we can prepare ourselves to receive God's revelation when it comes.

I think of the story of the Magi and of the fact that when they saw the star, they decided to follow. I suppose they didn't have to follow the star. They could have just noted the details, written them down in their journals and left it at that. Some star symbolizing some birth somewhere.

They could have stayed home, stayed comfortable, stayed safe. But they didn't. They chose to follow. They followed that star right into the seat of power of a despotic ruler and they spoke about what they believed. **They became involved in agendas not of their own making, they became vulnerable, but they followed despite the risk.**

So, is there a star that has risen for you?

Is there something that you know you are being called to follow, to explore, to allow yourself to be vulnerable about? **Is there something to which God might be calling you out of your comfort and safe zone? Will you follow where the spirit leads and maybe discover something new about God, something new about yourself? What might happen if you did that, if you chose to act on something that you didn't fully understand, but around which you felt the compelling call of God?**

The NYT columnist Nicholas Kristoff tells the story of Rachel Beckwith, a 9 year old girl from Seattle. In her church one day Rachel heard about people in parts of Africa who lacked clean water. And something in her young mind and heart clicked about how people half a world away were still God's children, deserving of love, of the basic needs of life. And in her young life a star rose and she followed where it led. So instead of asking for presents on her 9th birthday, she asked people to donate to an organization that drilled wells for clean water in Africa. She hoped to raise \$300. She saw on the organization's website that other people were also doing what she was doing, some raising money through asking people to donate instead of giving wedding gifts, or for a bar mitzvah. Some raised \$5000, others \$750, and still others around \$1500. Rachel was disappointed when her birthday campaign fell a little short of her goal of \$300. She only raised \$220.

Then less than 6 weeks after her 9th birthday, Rachel's family was involved in a car accident. Her family were fine, but Rachel was critically injured and lapsed into a coma. While she was in hospital, as friends and church members prayed for her recovery, they remembered her campaign for clean water and began to donate to it as an act of solidarity with Rachel. The contributions climbed over \$1000, then \$5000, then \$10,000.

Rachel's condition did not improve but her family whispered to her, not knowing whether she could hear them or not, that her campaign had broken the record for donations to the charity set by Justin Bieber of \$47,544. Finally, her family made the heartbreaking decision to remove Rachel from life support and she died surrounded by her family and a growing community of people who were inspired by her decision to follow a path. In the end Rachel's commitment to bring clean water to those in need raised over \$1.25 million, enough to provide clean water for 37,000 people.¹

A 9 year old girl, chose to follow God's invitation to see all people as worthy of compassion and dignity. Though she died tragically young, she followed her star and her decision ultimately affected thousands of lives. A year after Rachel's death, her mother traveled to Africa and was stunned to see the impact that her young daughter had on the lives of so many Ethiopian villagers. It was an epiphany.

So, where's our growing edge? What's God calling you to explore? Where is God inviting you to follow? What stars are rising on your horizon?

¹ Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl Wu Dunn, *A Path Appears*

Is it about caring for people who are way outside your normal orbit of concern? Or could it be about people much closer to home, those without a home, those for whom home is unbearable because of rejection, anger, abuse, violence? We're only days away from the beginning of a new year, the time when all sorts of resolutions are made and far too quickly broken. You know what's pretty common about New Year's resolutions, other than that most of us never end up keeping them past the first couple of weeks? I think that our resolutions all tend to have a common element, which is that they are about our desire to be more in control. We resolve to master our appetites, to control our cravings, to lose weight, to give up an addiction. We resolve to learn a new skill, to take a course of action that will improve who we are. We make a resolution to be more caring, to expand our sense of compassion, to be more disciplined in the exercise of our faith. **It's about control, control over the kind of person we want to be, over the kind of life we want to have.** It's like a map.

We know where we are and we know where we want to get to, and we have a pretty good idea of what we need to do, the journey it will take for us to get there. **But when it comes to Jesus, we'd better be careful about the kind of resolutions we make.**

The Magi found the one who was born king of the Jews. They were filled with overwhelming joy, but not long after that, they get a warning, don't go back to Herod. You have to imagine a bit here. Everyone in the area knows about this traveling troupe of visitors from the east. Word has spread from Jerusalem throughout the land. They are Gentiles in a Jewish land; they stick out like Dennis Rodman in North Korea. Now they have to sneak back home and avoid any contact with Herod or his lackeys. Risk has entered into the equation. **They no longer are in control of the situation**

and they have no maps for this part of the journey. What the text tells us is that if you encounter an epiphany, you've got be prepared to lose control.

What do we do with an epiphany?

When God is made manifest in our lives, in the life of the world, what does that do to us? If we take it seriously, **we have to confess that God then becomes the one in control, not us. The response to epiphany is not control or confidence, but obedience and trust.** If our resolution this year is to seek a closer relationship with Jesus, if we are truly wanting to grow in our faith, **we need to be ready to accept and embrace risk, to be told to take a different path from the ones we're used to.** We need to be prepared to travel along a less familiar road than the one we currently are on, maybe even one for which there's no map. We've got to be prepared to listen differently, to different voices.

Herod's is the voice that is most common. It's the voice we expect, the one with authority in this world. Herod's is the voice of safety, that one that doesn't expect too much of us. Just do as you're told, do what's expected. Don't risk it. Go back to Jerusalem, report back to the authorities, and you get to go home just the way you came. But Herod's voice would ignore the epiphany and the Magi have experienced too much to remain the same. Be careful about the kind of resolutions we make about Jesus, because we might find that if we're serious, when epiphany encounters us, the road cannot be the same.

It's a new year, a new beginning.

What is it as we begin this new year, that's been gnawing at you for some time, but you just haven't had the time or energy or maybe courage to follow up on?

What is it that would put you at risk, leave you vulnerable, get you involved in some other agenda than your own, but might, in the end, reveal something unexpected, something astonishing, about God, and about you as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Are we overdue for an epiphany?

Will we follow the stars that God places in our lives? If we never leave the safety, comfort, predictability and security of our home bases, what new revelation might we be missing out on? The Magi sought the one who was born king of the Jews, the one who the prophets declared would shepherd God's people Israel, but also so much more. What was revealed was the good news that God is the God of all people, not only the people of Israel, but the Persians, the Gentiles, all the peoples. What was revealed was the gift of God's love for all creation.

Where might that good news take you and take our congregations in this new year? Maybe this is the year that we ditch the old maps we used before because they only take us down roads we've already been.

It would be so tragic if we caught a glimpse of an epiphany about God, about God's love for all, God's broadness of compassion, grace and mercy, and then chose to stay the same, chose to remain just as we are, chose to return to Herod and forsake the dream. The wise men sought the one born as the king of the Jews. They sought, they encountered Jesus, they worshipped him, and they went home by another road.

It is true, the wise still seek him.

As we seek Jesus and as the risen Christ meets us, as we are encountered by an epiphany, a revelation, a new understanding, may we worship him and pay him homage, offering our best gifts, and may we commit to travelling by another road as well.

Thanks be to God, Amen!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim: preached on December 29, 2019
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