

When you see the star, get moving!  
A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church  
Sunday closest to Epiphany  
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Matthew 2: 1-12

Today, the church celebrates Epiphany, the coming of the wise men from the east to the stable in Bethlehem. The word Epiphany, means a moment of sudden and great revelation. When we have an epiphany, our eyes are opened, we see clearly something that up to that time was obscure and confusing; it is our “A-HA” moment. Epiphany moments are caused by the direct intervention of the Spirit into our lives. They are almost impossible to ignore, which is a good thing because epiphany moments are precious moments and should never be ignored. When the wise men saw the star at its rising they got on their camels and got moving even though they had no idea exactly where they were going. That’s why they ended up in Herod’s palace asking “Where is he who is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him.” They didn’t know where they were going. But they had to start their journey anyway. Life is like that sometimes. We begin our journeys without knowing exactly where we are going to end up. When the Spirit shows up we have to be ready. When we see the star we have to get moving whether we know exactly where we are going or not.

We celebrate “Epiphany” and the story of the wise men every year. This Tuesday, January 5, is the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, and it marks the end of the Christmas season of the church. Wednesday, January 6, is the day of Epiphany, the day of enlightenment, when our eyes are opened to the meaning of the miracle of Christmas. It is the day when we metaphorically see the star for ourselves, when everything makes sense, when we recognize the baby in the Bethlehem manger as the Son of the Most High, Emmanuel, God with us. We have spent the last two months getting ready for the star. In the season of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas, we prepared ourselves for Christ’s birth by reading the prophecies and reflecting on what these prophecies might mean in our day. Then in the 12 days of Christmas we marveled at the wonder of Christmas, and try to take in the magic of this very special child. But our time of reflecting and marvelling is over now. It’s time to get moving. The star is in the sky and it calls us to follow it. We know who this child is. Our camels are waiting for us in the driveway. The star won’t wait forever though. The time right now is what some people call our *window of opportunity*. But windows of opportunity don’t stay open forever, and this window of opportunity will be closing on Wednesday, February 17, when we will begin the season of Lent, which like Advent, is another time of reflection as we prepare for Easter. Between now and then we will review what happened at Glebe Road United Church in 2009, and we will prepare for 2010, which is already upon us. There will be challenges to deal with, meetings to attend, and prayers to offer up as we try to follow our star and find the child that is the centre of our life.

Today, I would like to look at the story of the wise men to see if there are any hints to help us as we plan our journey. I’ve already mentioned the first bit of intelligence that we should notice, and that is that the wise men headed into God-knows-where without knowing exactly where they were going, having only their belief in the star before them to give them courage and to push them onward. I suspect we are going to need to keep that in mind as we go forward.

The wise men were seeking the King of the Jews. So it seemed to natural to go to the land of Jews to find him. The star was in the west, which was approximately the right direction to Palestine. It was a good guess. When they got to Palestine they went to the capital city, which was another good guess, but as we know it was the wrong place to go. They went to the palace of the apparent leader of the people, which was another good guess, looking for the King of the Jews. I suppose they must have thought that King Herod and his Queen had just had a child born to them. Imagine Herod's surprise when these impressive foreign visitors with their wealthy gifts asked Herod, "Where is the baby, the one born to be the King of the Jews?" Herod would not have been amused. "King of the Jews? Why, that would be me, and as you can see I'm all grown up now." Sooner or later the wise men would have figured out that they were in the enemy camp. The one they were looking for would be a rival to the current king, and they have just alerted him to the existence of the rival, who was just a baby somewhere in the land. They had been enlightened because they knew of the birth of this special child, but the current king had not been so favoured, and by showing up at his palace as they did, and asking about a baby king as they did, they put their foot in it, they made a mistake, they got it wrong. So when you see the star, expect to take some wrong turns, expect to make mistakes, expect that we will need to improvise, adapt, adjust to what is happening to us.

For his part, a frightened and suspicious Herod has to play catch-up. He calls his committee of experts together and asks them to explain to him what is going on. They experts guess that the wise men are looking for the Messiah, promised by the prophets. "So where is the Messiah to be born", he wanted to know. They chief priests and scribes flipped through the scrolls of the prophets and found the scroll of Micah, chapter 5 verse 2 (we can look it up too if we want to) that said

***"In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "***

Now Herod knew they answer that the wise men were looking for but Herod hadn't seen the star and he needed that to get his timing right. So, the story says that he dismissed his experts and met with the wise men in secret, and they exchanged with one another the information that each of them needed. Herod then tried to use the wise men for his own purposes:

***He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."***

So what do we learn from this. I think it means that just because we've seen the star doesn't mean that we have all the answers. God doesn't seem to work that way. God expects us to do our part too. We will meet obstacles in our path. The wise men met someone who would be an enemy to the child and its welfare, a rival who would later try to kill him. They had to keep their wits about them. They had to, in the words of Jesus after he grew up, "be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves."

Who knows what challenges we will face on our journey to follow the star. Whatever, they are though, we will need to stay awake, and be aware that our future is in our hands, that we are expected to play our part in ensuring the success of our journey.

The story continues. They wise men find the child, they are overwhelmed with joy, they offer him gifts. And most importantly, they listen to their dreams because God has been walking with them every step of the

way, and God ensures that the child will be safe from Herod. They avoid the palace and return to their country another way. This buys time for the child and its family to escape from the danger that lurks ahead.

What do we learn from this. Perhaps we learn that God walks with us too on our journey. Certainly, we can't expect God to do everything for us, but we can expect that God will not abandon us in our quest to follow our star. Perhaps this is something to keep in mind as we begin our journey, as we face the challenges that anyone who seeks to follow their star will face.

The story of the wise men is our story too.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

The wise men must have been standing nearby when these words were spoken to Herod, because now they knew where to look; and of course, Herod knew too.

After Epiphany we begin a new season of the church when we too are called to reflect on the continue to reflect on the meaning of Christ's life and ministry, but this season after Epiphany ends abruptly around the middle of February when Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent, the 40 day period leading up Good Friday and Easter Sunday. So Epiphany is an important day in our life of faith, the day when the light of Christ and the meaning of his life and ministry are supposed to fill our lives.

Usually, it doesn't happen quite that way though. Epiphany is usually overshadowed by our celebrations of New Years, the time of dispensing with the year just ended and looking forward to the promise of a new year ahead. We make our New Years' resolutions, buy our new date books and throw ourselves back into our normal lives after holidays that seem too brief and too soon ended. And life continues, pretty much as it did before the holidays.

I wonder if we might break up that routine a little by looking more carefully at this day of enlightenment, this day of Epiphany. I wonder if we might take some time before we jump on our familiar treadmills again and reflect on what all of this might mean to us. What can we learn from the wise men in their search for enlightenment?

How do we get "enlightened" anyway. Paul has some things to say about that in his letter to the Ephesians, which is the Lectionary Epistle reading for this day. On most Epiphany Sundays we only read the Isaiah 60 reading and the gospel story of the wise men, and we skip the Ephesians reading, but for this year I've decided to include it as well. So listen now to a reading from Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus, Chapter 3: 1-12:

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in

the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Paul claims that the mystery of Christ was made known to him by God in a very direct way through revelation. We modern and post-modern people will find this discouraging, because we value the idea of doing things for ourselves. The “self-made man” or now the “self-made woman” is our ideal. We don’t spend a lot of time praying for revelation or insight; instead, we read the latest recommended books on the subject in which we need enlightenment; or we give our money to the most revered expert in the field that we can find. And experts of all sorts and descriptions wait with their hands out to take our money and dispense their wisdom. Paul’s idea that mysteries can be solved by direct intervention from God seems very strange to us modern people. Paul would have a very difficult time of it if we were trying to convince us that God had revealed the mysteries of the universe to him alone, and if we wanted the benefits of his insights all we had to do was join one of his churches. And yet, this is exactly what he said; listen again to verses 8-12:

8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

Paul’s message was that the Jewish Messiah had come not just for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well. Everyone now has access to the grace of God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We do not achieve this gift by our good works, or by acquiring special knowledge. Nothing we can do will make God love us any more than God already loves us, and nothing we can do will make God love us any less than God already loves us. We are loved already by the gift of God’s grace, which is available to all.

Paul’s own experience with the gifts of the Spirit teach us that this Spirit can fall on anyone, even those who seem to be the most unworthy recipients of such a blessing. It was Paul who persecuted the early church, and it was when he was riding to Damascus to arrest any Christians he could find there that the Spirit knocked him off his horse, and a bright light heaven blinded him and a voice from heaven demanded to know why Paul was persecuting him. So the Spirit can hit anyone with its gifts of grace.

This was a hard lesson for the early church to learn. Many in the church opposed Paul’s idea that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first. For them, the Messiah would only come for the Jews, for the literally circumcised people. The debate raged on for hundreds of years until Paul’s arguments eventually won out. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians would have been part of his argument against those in the church who opposed him, and we should read his letter with that in mind. And we should also read the gospels in the context of that argument as well, since the decision to admit Gentiles into the church was not made final until many years after Paul’s death and after the gospels had been written.

In particular, the Epiphany story should be read as an argument for the righteousness of earnest Gentiles. The wisemen from the east were Gentile scholars. They did not know that the prophets said that the

Messiah would be born in Bethlehem; that's why they came to Herod. Interestingly enough, Herod didn't seem to know either and had to consult with his experts, the chief priests and scribes of the people. The wise men did not receive the news of Christ's birth by revelation, no Damascus experience for them. Instead, they were enlightened by God's Creation itself and the study of its stars. They were the scientists of their day, and while we know now that many of their ideas about the universe were incorrect, the idea that humans can know something of the Creator by studying the Creation is something that we share with ancient civilizations. Modern and post-modern people can buy into that idea much easier than we can believe in lights from heaven and revelations that throw you off your horse and strike you blind.

Together the readings from Ephesians and from Matthew show us that God reaches out to humanity in both spiritual and intellectual ways. God's grace and God's truth flow to us both through our heads and through our hearts. The common thread that it seems to me that we need to hear in our day is our need to respond to God's Word no matter how it is received. If Paul had ignored his Damascus experience and his call to apostleship then he would have remained blind and continued to resist the message of God through Christ. If the wise men had ignored their observations and stayed in the safety of their homes and their home country then they would never have heard the good news of Christ's birth. Our experiences of Epiphany always require a response from us if they are going to be life-changing. That was true in Jesus' day and it remains true in our day as well. God continues to reach out to God's people, but the message is only ever received when we make an effective response to that message.

Every year on the Sunday closest to January 6, we read the story of the wise men from the east. It's one of the best know Bible stories around. We teach it to our children, and we watch them enact the story in Christmas pageants every year. Many of you were here two weeks ago to see ??, ?? and ?? making their way down the aisle in their kingly robes to meet Luke in his perennial role as Herod the King. And every year your poor minister has to preach on it, say something new about it, show you once again why it is important, why anyone in our day and age should bother with it at all.

Of course, no one actually takes this story seriously. The wise men were supposed to have seen a new star in the heavens, which they believed heralded the birth of a great king. We know better. Depending on how far away it is, the light from this new star has probably spent thousands of years getting to us, so how could it be connected to something happening now. Scientific studies *have* shown that there was a rare confluence of three planets in the time around the birth of Jesus, which may have confused scholars of the day, but even if this were the star of Bethlehem, everyone knows that planets don't stop in their tracks over a stable in Bethlehem, or anywhere else for that matter. So once we bring any knowledge of modern astronomy to this story it falls apart. Where then is the "Epiphany", the "A-HA" moment for us?

The trick with this story is the same trick that we have to learn for most Bible stories. We need to learn that these stories were not written for us. The person who wrote the gospel of Matthew didn't know about us, didn't know about our modern world of telescopes, space travel and science. Matthew wrote this story of an ancient people who had come together to form something we would later call the Christian church. They were risking their lives over a the idea that in the life of Jesus whom they called the Christ they had found something special, something that changed them. They had experienced in his one man their Epiphany,

their A-HA moment, and life would never be the same again. And if we in our day are going to understand this story, we need to put ourselves in their shoes for a few minutes. So let's go back now to the first century, to the early church, and read the story again in a way that we have never read it before.

Perhaps we can more insight into the meaning of this story by reading the companion epistle for this day, which comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Remember though, that this letter wasn't written for us either; like the gospels, Paul's letters were written to encourage and support the early Christians, meeting in secrecy in house churches that Paul had established during his journeys across the Empire. Paul was a Jew, and a Pharisee, educated in the Jewish law and the prophets, proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth, recently crucified by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem, was the long awaited Messiah of the Jews, foretold by the prophets who had written what we call the Old Testament. On the face of it this was a ridiculous claim since those prophets had said that the Messiah would be a king like his ancestor David, a military man who would drive the enemies of God's people out of the promised land – that would be the Romans of course, but these same Romans had crucified this “king” instead. Some Messiah, some king!

“Where is he that is born king of the Jews; for we have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him”. These are innocuous and familiar words to us, but to their intended audience the claim of these important, foreign visitors is loaded with an explosive significance has been lost to us in our day. Stars were taken very seriously back then. You would know that if you lived in the Roman Empire in the first century. Everyone back then would remember that shortly after the assassination of Julius Caesar, a comet was observed in the night sky, which was claimed by the Roman authorities as proof positive that their dead emperor was now ascending into the heavens to take his place as a god among the other gods of Roman religion. Julius Caesar had become a god. Shrines were set up to worship him as a god. To refuse to do so was high treason. It could get you crucified.

If Julius Caesar was now a god that would mean that the then current emperor, Caesar Augustus, was the Son of God. But that was just the beginning, because by the time of Jesus, Caesar Augustus had been declared a god during his lifetime, which was a first even for the emperors of Rome. He was declared a god on the coins that were used to buy bread in the market. Shrines were now set up to worship him as well, and it was against the law not to do so.

But these magi have come up to Herod and ask, “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?” But the King of the Jews at that time was Herod Antipas himself, declared to be so by the Emperor, the Son of God Augustus no less. So Herod's quick answer to their question must have been, “The King of the Jews? You're looking at him. I am the King of the Jews. Duh!”

And that's the point of this story. The powers of the great Roman Empire have declared Augustus to be a god, and Herod Antipas to be the King of the Jews. But now, here come the astrologers with the counter-claim: three sages from the east, outside the borders of the Empire, have arrived seeking another king of the Jews, whose kingship is justified, not by Augustus, but by the starry heavens, the same basis for deity claimed by the emperor himself. When we read these words in our day we think of our delightful children's pageant, but the first Christians would think of the brutality of the Roman occupation, the deaths

of martyrs, and the hope, which came with the declaration of these important visitors of the real king of the Jews. For the ancient people, this story justifies the claim of Jesus of Nazareth and not Augustus was the Son of God, and that God's anointed one, this same Jesus was the real king of the Jews.

The story continues: "When King Herod heard this he was frightened .... and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea for so it has been written by the prophet". Herod know that he was dealing with the long awaited Messiah, the anointed one of God. That's why he was frightened. He responded by calling upon *his* wise men, the Chief Priest and the scribes. He learns what the eastern sages do not yet know, and then secretly contacts them. We always miss that detail in the children's pageant, when the three kings, played by Hayden, Brandy and Peter, walked down the centre aisle directly to Luke, who was our King Herod. According to the scripture it couldn't have happened that way; instead, the meeting was a clock and dagger affair, with both sides looking out for their security and seeking advantage. Herod tells the magi where to go to find the child, but wants a report in return. When the magi don't keep their side of the bargain, Herod does what any king would do to a potential rival: he sends his soldiers to kill the child. So it was; so it is; sot it always will be. The man who claims that the first shall be last and the last first is attacked by the powerful of every age whose empires and kingdoms exist to insure that first will be first; that the rich get richer and poor get poorer.

When we read this story through the eyes of the first Christians we can begin to understand the threat that the coming of God's Messiah among us poses to established order. When we sing in the Hallelujah chorus that the King of Kings and the Lords of Lords will reign forever and ever, we usually miss the fact that this "good news" for us comes as bad news to every other king and lord. It was bad news to Herod Antipas in ancient times. And it was bad news for every emperor of Rome for the next 300 years. But then a truce of sorts between God and mammon was declared. The emperor Constantine succeeded in neutralizing the church by making Christianity the official religion of the Empire in an effort to hold his tottering empire together. It didn't work and the empire eventually fell, but the church, once it had tasted wealth and privilege became addicted to its advantages. After the fall of Rome, the church tried to keep its prestige and wealth by affiliating itself with a variety of kings and potentates. The power of the church grew until it began to compete with earthly powers. Then Henry VIII turned the tables on the pope by declaring that the king of England was the head of the church in that country, a step that even Constantine in his day did not dare to take. From then on, the union of church and state was complete and we lost the idea of any tension between them as the church was pulled more and more into its orbit around earthly thrones. It is only in our day, when the church has become so weak that it is of no more use to governments, that we are free to once again read our scriptures as the documents of subversion that they have always been.

The good news of Jesus Christ has not changed. The limited authority of human power is always, sooner or later, subject to the laws of God. Mighty empires are always destined to fade away. Earthly powers that set themselves up against the laws of justice will eventually fail. And this, if we will but hear it, is our Epiphany, our A-HA moment.

In our day, the church has for the first time in centuries been rejected by the established order and become aligned with the poor and oppressed people of the world. We in the west often bemoan the loss of status for the church: some of us can remember when the church was consulted by political authorities, when the voice of the church meant something to those outside it, but those days are now gone. We need to see it as a

blessing in disguise! The church is now free to fulfill the mission set before it by Christ himself when he walked the earth: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, stand with the oppressed and the victims of the world.

“Where is he who is born King of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him”. The Christ of history is in the place where he has always been. He was born in a stable because the world had no room for him or his world-changing gospel. He was broken on a cross by the powerful and the privileged. He lives still, calling those of us who will listen to follow him, calling us to be part of his kingdom of justice and abundant life of all Creation.

And for this we give thanks to God.

Amen

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— 2 for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, 3 and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, 4 a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. 5 In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: 6 that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 7 Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace that was given me by the working of his power. 8 Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, 9 and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; 10 so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. 11 This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12 in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king,

they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.