Three Challenges of Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6 Kimby Young

Matthew 2:1-12 January 5, 2025

Matthew 5:14-16

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas – so officially, liturgically, the season of Christmas ends today. The last of our Christmas songs and stories. Tomorrow is Epiphany – and we will explore the theme of Epiphany a day early today. Epiphany is the season of revelation and illumination. Today we talk about stars and light and God’s mystery revealed in Jesus Christ. Epiphany closes off the Christmas story with the star and the visit of the wise travelers and the journey home. The season of Epiphany continues on beyond just tomorrow as we explore themes of God’s revelation in the world for the next few weeks. We notice the light of Christ shining in the darkness of the world, even today.

It’s not that suddenly we turn off the Christmas lights and only see the darkness of the world. But with Epiphany there is a subtle shift in the light. The focus changes from the bright glow of Christmas, to something a little more mysterious. Maybe we have to look a little harder to see the light. We must try a little more to notice God with us. Epiphany calls us to notice, to focus on Jesus, to see the light of God’s love. We look for signs all around us – evidence of God’s love for us and for the whole world.

You see, the Christmas story is very focused. The people of the Christmas story are all part of God’s family of faith. Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the people of Bethlehem, the prophets – these were all local faithful people of Judah, awaiting and expecting a Messiah to come as the king of the Jews. They were looking for the Savior, looking for signs of God’s love – the God they knew and served. But the magi – the wise travelers from the east – they broaden the story beyond this one family of faith, beyond this one nation and people. The wise magi throw open the door of light and salvation to the entire world. They show that Jesus came to reveal God – not just to the few and the faithful – but to absolutely everyone. Epiphany is about inclusion, expansion, openness, invitation, revelation and understanding – a gift of God’s grace to anyone and everyone who would seek. Epiphany is about inviting the stranger who is welcome by God. Epiphany is about evangelism and sharing the good news. Epiphany is about seeing the signs of that good news everywhere and in all circumstances – looking for God and so finding the grace of God. And Epiphany is about sharing those signs and sharing that love of God with everyone, everywhere we go.

Epiphany offers three challenges for us.

First, the challenge of the star; Second, the challenge of the gifts; and Third, the challenge of going home.

First the challenge of the star. Scripture says, “Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star and have come to worship him.’” We don’t know much about the wise seekers – except that they are from east of Jerusalem. Tradition names them as men and kings and numbers them three – though the number is not in the Bible is is probably assumed because of the number of gifts. They may have been from Babylon – the ancient enemy of Israel and so a reference to the peace and reconciliation God offers to the world. They were seekers. People looking for signs – and perhaps looking for signs of God. Signs in the heavens, in the natural order, in the political powers of the day, open to wisdom, open to revelation of God. I find it interesting that the star was there for all to see, and yet only these few came searching. The star was there. The sign of God’s presence, of God’s miracle, was obvious for everyone – but not everyone saw. And so it is today. The signs are all around us – the signs of God’s love, the assurances of God’s presence, the miracles of God’s grace – they are everywhere. And yet not everyone sees. Epiphany is all about seeing the star, recognizing the signs, and coming to worship God. God is here. Our invitation is to see and recognize the star – to see and recognize God. Look for the signs that point us toward God. Today – in bread and juice, in body and blood, in forgiveness, in renewal, in communion shared among people who are seeking God. Ordinary signs of extraordinary love. Now the challenge of the star goes beyond just seeking the signs. It includes showing the signs, helping others to see, pointing out the signs of God to a world desperately seeking. We must shine the light of God’s love in the world so that all will see that light and will come to worship God.

The second challenge of Epiphany is the challenge of gifts. Scripture says the wise men worshipped the baby Jesus “and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.” We don’t know why these gifts. We don’t know how they were used. We do know these gifts were symbols that pointed forward to the life of Jesus representing purity, worship, suffering, death, and healing. They pointed forward to the gifts Jesus would offer to the world. The seekers offered gifts. They gave what they had. And God used their gifts for good. The same is true for us. Our challenge is to offer our gifts – our gifts of time, talent, prayer, property, care, love, insight and invitation. Offer our gifts with the confidence that God will use whatever we give. Offer our gifts with the adoration of the wise seekers who have encountered the Savior of the world and know that their lives are forever changed.

Which leads to the third challenge of the season of Epiphany - the challenge of going home changed. Scripture says that when it was time for the wise men to leave Bethlehem, they were warned in a dream to go “home by another way.” The point is that the wise men were changed by their encounter with Jesus. We all are changed when we truly know Jesus. Yes, they had to go home – we all have to go home, back to the normal routine of the world, back to everyday life. We can’t stay in the fantastic. We can’t live always in Christmas. We must go home, back to reality, back to the real world with all its complications. But the Good News of Epiphany is that because of Christmas, because of the birth of our Savior, because God came into the world in the flesh, and because of our encounter with God through Jesus Christ – our lives are never the same again. If we truly know Jesus Christ, we will never see the world in the same way. We will never be able to see the world without the presence of God with us. Just like the wise men, we go home by another way. They could not fall back into their old patterns; they could not see the stars in the same way; they could not rely on the political structure of the world in the same way. You see, they started this journey looking for a political power of the world – looking for a new born king. They wanted to make an alliance, to gain power for themselves. So they went straight to Herod, assuming the powers of the world were the powers they should trust. But after finding Jesus, they could not go back to Herod, they could not trust the powers of this world. They knew a greater power than political power, a greater power than this world. They knew a greater power than the way it had always been. They had to learn trust in a new way. They had to go home by another way.

And so do we.

We cannot see the world without Christ. We cannot act as if we don’t know God is with us. We must live our lives in light of the nativity – the birth of Jesus. We must trust God. We must walk our journey of life as those who have seen the star, have encountered the Christ, and know that we walk with God. And like the magi we must go back into the world – but in the world as those who have been transformed by God’s grace, in the world as ones who seek to transform the world by that grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Shine your light, you wise seekers of God. Shine your light - you who know and love the Lord. Shine your light - that others may see that light of Christ in you and come to worship God. Shine your light that others may discover Jesus, and may experience the glory and wonder of God who is the Light of the World. Amen.