

Epiphany, Yr A, 01-05-14  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*"For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."*

On the twelfth day of Christmas my true love gave to me 12 drummers drumming, 11 pipers piping, 10 lords a-leaping, 9 ladies dancing, 8 maids a-milking, 7 swans a-swimming, 6 geese a-laying, 5 golden rings, 4 calling birds, 3 French hens, 2 turtle doves and a Sunday that we call Epiphany!

Yes, today is the twelfth day of Christmas and tomorrow is the Epiphany, the day in the Christmas story when the magi arrive to bring their gifts to the baby Jesus, and the beginning of an entire season when we read and learn about the revelation of Christ to humanity as the light of the world. Today's Gospel lesson is the same whether we are calling today the Second Sunday after Christmas or the Feast of the Epiphany - the story of the arrival of the magi. It is the end of the Christmas story and the beginning of the Epiphany. I know it sounds confusing - or boring, maybe - give me a minute or two and it might make sense.

On Christmas Eve we listened again to the Nativity story from the Gospel of Luke, easily visualized on the pastoral Palestinian hillsides near Bethlehem. Smelly shepherds caring for even smellier sheep were trying to settle in for the night... their daily routine disrupted by an angel with a message and a back-up angelic glee club with a new refrain to go with it. The shepherds decided to go into town to see for themselves what was going on, and they discovered a young family from Nazareth...an unmarried couple away from home with a newborn baby...and none of the conveniences even of that time and place.

Those shepherds were not all together clear about what they had seen and heard that night, but their hearts were filled with joy nonetheless. They seemed to know down deep inside that their lives were changed that night...that their world was a different place... that something new was happening right before their eyes. As this story was unfolding on the slopes of Palestine, another story was developing elsewhere. The Magi -- wise men we sometimes call them -- came from the east and started asking questions around town. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We have followed his rising star and we have come to give him honor."

Who were these guys? Where were they from? How did they get word of all this?

And for heaven's sake, what was all that business about following a star? When outsiders from a faraway place showed up asking questions about things the locals were not sure about themselves, you can imagine what the reaction of the authorities might have been! King Herod was more than a little shaken up by it all, fearing his power might be taken from him, and he worked at getting the Magi to help him locate the child.

Indeed, the three strange foreigners found the child and were so overwhelmed by what they found that they fell upon their knees in worship and praise and adoration. Like the shepherds on the hillside, they began to realize that something was changing in their world...that a new thing was happening...that a new world was being born. In a dream they received a warning and escaped from King Herod before giving him the information he so desperately desired. Still another angel warned Mary and Joseph to take the baby and escape south to Egypt until Herod was dead and their return home was safe.

It is a wonderful story, full of passion and trickery, easy to picture in our mind's eye. It provides the inspiration for art and music, for poetry and song. Few stories told through the centuries are so familiar...so beloved...so rich with both misery and delight. It is the stuff out of which children's nativity pageants are made: shepherds in muslin 'coats' with ropes around their waists...Mary in her blue gown and Joseph looking dazed by it all...angels in choir robes and aluminum foil halos...and wise men with gold-foil crowns on their heads and costume jewelry boxes in their hands. The tableau unfolds just as it should, and it ends on a glorious note when the Magi fall upon their knees and worship Christ the newborn king. We feel all warm and satisfied inside.

The story is one all of us know by heart, but our Christmas music and children's pageants have tamed it so much that the point the gospel writer is making is often hidden from our eyes. Matthew was telling the story of the birth of Jesus for new Christians, for new followers of the Way; but even in such a young church it seems that their vision was limited. The boundaries of their community were already closing tightly around them. Matthew could see already that the new believing community was too easily settling into the idea that this new life in Christ was mainly just for them; they were already getting too comfortable with themselves and too easily willing to put others outside.

Matthew shocked his audience right from the first verse of his gospel by

recounting the genealogy of Jesus. He did so in a way that must have confused those who first read it or heard it. A genealogy in those days was traced through the male lineage, but Matthew broke from tradition and included four women in his list of the ancestors of Jesus. And they were not just any four women. They were women whose lives bore the scars of prostitution and incest, of adultery and murder. Matthew was laying the groundwork, even in his outwardly boring list of names of very dead folks, that the coming new day was quite different from anything one might be expecting.

And Matthew kept up the theme when he introduced the Magi. We often call them wise men, but that is almost surely to give them a status that would have been unrecognized by Matthew's readers. Some have suggested they were philosophers; others have called them astrologers because of their fascination with the stars. But whoever they were and wherever they were from, Matthew's point was that they were not from here; these were not hometown folks...with hometown values... and hometown upbringing. These were odd fellows from some foreign land, the kind of folks that the Scriptures warn good religious people to stay away from.

The first hearers of Matthew's story of Jesus would not have had such warm, fuzzy feelings when the Magi fell to their knees before the manger-throne of the King of Kings. Quite the opposite! Matthew's readers would have been scandalized by the audacity of three strangers from a foreign land who would dare to show up in their hometown to worship and adore their newborn king. "We can't have this!" would have been their first response, and it was precisely the response that Matthew was hoping for.

Matthew had his audience right where he wanted them, and now he could begin to unfold the rest of the story of Jesus. He could now remind his readers -- and he continues to remind us -- that the saving word of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not for some, but for all. Not for men only, but for women, too. Not for the perfect only, but for those whose lives bear the scars of unthinkable human pain. Not for the hometown crowd only, but for those on the other side of the tracks, the next town over or even halfway around the world. Not for those who believe just like we do, but also for those who are struggling to believe anything at all, or those who have lost their faith.

The Magi may have been seen as a strange lot walking through the ancient Holy Land, but they stand early in the Gospel of Matthew as witness to the fact that no

one is beyond the reach of the *Good News*. No one is so strange and foreign that he can't make a way to Christ, or so blind that she cannot be drawn in by his most wondrous light.

Let the epiphany - the revelation - of this winter be that Jesus came for all people. Let the light that shines in the darkness illuminate the gifts that we can bring to honor the King of all. Amen.