

Sermon "Aha"
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Scripture Matthew 2: 1-12

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men* from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah* was to be born. ⁵They 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. ⁸Then 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.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,* they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon "Aha"

Aha! I bet we have all had Aha moments. I know I have. It's when that lightbulb goes off in my head and I can say, "I get it!" It's an epiphany. The Cambridge Dictionary defines epiphany as "a moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you." Aha!

Well Epiphany, in church circles refers to the visitation of the Christ child by the three wise men. January 6th is the celebration of the Epiphany. That same dictionary defines Epiphany as a "Christian holy day in January (traditionally January 6 in Western Christianity) that celebrates the revelation of the baby Jesus to the world." And Webster's Dictionary defines

it as “a feast celebrating of the manifestation of Christ’s divinity to the Gentiles, represented by the Magi.” And this morning we celebrate Epiphany as we hear our reading from Matthew’s gospel.

So what if we put the Epiphany of our faith and the epiphany of common language together?

Matthew tells us that wise men, learned men noticed a new star in the sky. Perhaps we could call them astrologers. We could also call them seekers. They had observed a new star at its rising, a specific and special star. It would lead them to a newborn king. They were men in search of, seeking a newborn king. Aha!

Now, just a reminder, Matthew says nothing about these men being kings. He identifies three gifts but does not say that there were three men. Matthew does not give them names. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow did that. Matthew meant for them to represent people of the world, and the revelation of God made human to the world.

But back to that star. I don’t know what it was that excited these men about this particular star but for them it was something meaningful. I wonder if scientists at NASA have had aha moments when they look into space, when they have discovered that there are whole other universes out there. Maybe they have had Aha moments or maybe moments of awe and Ahh’s. I know that when I see photos of stars and galaxies ... sometimes I feel a “wow” - a feeling of awe. There is something spectacular about universes, the sun and the moon, planets and stars.

But for wise men to notice one particular star, to associate it with a newborn king, and follow it from a distant land to a small town, is a compelling story. The wise men knew they were looking for a special infant, a king for the Jewish people. That became their purpose, to find that king.

They even stopped at Herod’s to ask directions. As you know, Herod had to consult Jewish priests and scribes. Amidst his fear of another king being born who could threaten his control of the Jewish people, Herod, that brutal ruler, learned out about the infant. It was an Aha for Herod, but a hmmm when we reflect on the fear that it sent through all Jerusalem. For as you know, he would later order the murder of young Jewish infants under 2 years old. Anyway, Herod told the wise men about Bethlehem and sent them off with instructions to return to him and let him know where they found this newborn king. Hmm

So the wise men, with directions from Herod and that amazing star as their guide, continued on. And in a humble home in Bethlehem, they found the king they were seeking. A king, in a humble dwelling. I don’t know whether that deserves an Aha! or a hmmm?

I wonder what those men thought when they saw this infant. I imagine they were moved. I don’t know anyone who can see a young infant and not be moved. I imagine their hearts were burning. But their thoughts? After all they were seeking a king, expecting perhaps a castle and servants. Instead they found this baby in a home with his parents. How unexpected was that!

They had brought gifts. They were not gifts for typical child, but gifts for a child who would be king- gold, frankincense and myrrh. These men were not Israelites but the significance of those gifts can be found in Hebrew Scripture. The giving of gold to a king is referenced in Psalm 72, a psalm asking for prayers of guidance and support for the king. It states “may the Gold of Sheba be given to him” (Ps 72:15)

Frankincense is a fragrant resin that was used throughout the Old Testament. In Exodus, the Lord gave Moses instructions for the use of frankincense in special anointings:

“You shall say to the Israelites, ‘This shall be my holy anointing-oil throughout your generations. It shall not be used in any ordinary anointing of the body, and you shall make no other like it in composition; it is holy, and it shall be holy to you.’” And the Lord told Moses to mix “sweet spices with pure frankincense (an equal part of each), and make an incense blended as by the perfumer, seasoned with salt, pure and holy; and you shall beat some of it into powder, and put part of it before the covenant in the tent of meeting where I shall meet you; it shall be for you most holy. When you make incense according to this composition, you shall not make it for yourselves; it shall be regarded by you as holy to the LORD. (Exodus 30: 31-37) So the Lord forbid the Israelites to use this sacred mixture with frankincense for everyday purposes. It was special.

And Isaiah prophesied about the bringing frankincense to the one who was to come in fulfillment of the Lord’s promise to Israel –

“Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁶ They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. (Isaiah 60:1-3, 6).

They shall bring gold and frankincense. It sounds like the story of our wise men this morning.

Myrrh is actually produced by trees and is secreted to heal the tree when its bark is injured. It was used for healing. But it was likewise used for anointing as we hear in this reading from Exodus. “The LORD spoke to Moses: Take the finest spices: of liquid myrrh, sweet-smelling aromatic cane, cassia, and a hin of olive oil; and you shall make of these a sacred anointing-oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing-oil. With it you shall anoint the tent of meeting and the ark of the covenant, and the table and all its utensils, and the lampstand and

its utensils, and the altar of incense, and the altar of burnt-offering with all its utensils, and the basin with its stand; (Exodus 30: 22-28)

Gold, frankincense and myrrh, curious gifts for an infant, but gifts special value in the time of Jesus. Gold would be offered to royalty. Frankincense and myrrh were used in anointing of the sacred. Truly they were chosen to honor this infant king.

How do we choose gifts for someone special? Perhaps we really think about the person and the gifts, perhaps we have an “aha” moment that helps us choose just the right gift. Perhaps Jesus’ visitors from a distant likewise chose their gifts in an “aha” moment.

This morning we continue to reflect on the stories surrounding birth of our God. On Christmas Eve, Luke gave us the story of Jesus, the Messiah found by shepherds in the manger. On Epiphany, Matthew gives us this story of that infant, found in a home in Bethlehem by wise men from far away. They had followed a star to an extraordinary baby in a humble setting and honored him with seemingly unusual but sacred gifts. Between these two accounts of the birth of our Lord, Jesus’ divinity was announced to shepherds, lowly men, and to strangers from distant lands, representing all people.

Today we reflect upon the story of Jesus’ divinity made known to people across the ancient world at his birth. Next week we will go forward with Jesus’ life and hear more of how Jesus’ divinity is proclaimed by his life.

This week our sanctuary is still decorated, perhaps our homes are as well. Next week, they will return to normal – no Advent banners, no creche, no garland, no poinsettias, no Christmas tree, no Christmas lights or candles. We will have put them away, to be taken out again next Christmas.

But what about light from a special star? What about the light that leads us to Jesus? What about that light that is Jesus? What happens to the light that is love, that pierces the darkness and darkness cannot overcome it? What is our epiphany, our understanding of how we are called to follow Jesus and bring his light to our world? How do we declare that Jesus is our God? Maybe this is what we need to think about as we take down our Christmas trees and put away the Christmas decorations – in this church and in our homes.

Perhaps we can consider these words from minister, theologian, educator and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, in his poem

The Work of Christmas

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

The work of Christmas begins now. Aha!

Credits:

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/epiphany>

Thurman, Howard, "The Work of Christmas," *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations* (1985)