

Call to Worship

O that we had the faithfulness of the Magi! **Then, God, nothing would stand in the way of our search for the highest good.**

O that we had the gifts of the Magi! **Then, God, we would present what is appropriate to Jesus, your Anointed One.**

O God, reveal the star to which we aspire and enable us to follow faithfully.

Prayer of Invocation

Lord, Open us to all that you would have us be, for you and for others.

'Breakthrough' into our lives and our church with new possibilities.

Amen.

The Word

Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, 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 at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When 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.

They told him, "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."

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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."

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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Living the Word

Today, January 6th is Epiphany. I am getting tired out. Last night I could hardly keep up the *Eleven Ladies Dancing* and I just got word that the *Twelve Lords a Leaping have arrived and they always leave such a mess...* More seriously, as I write the last of the thank you notes, re-examine the gifts as I put them in their new place in my life, and take the tree and wreath down, packing away the ornaments for one more year. I grieve the end of this busy season with a 'see ya' again next year.'

This is not the end of Christmas, only the beginning of seeking God. To do this we have to offer ourselves to the process and open ourselves to receiving Christ. It is a lifelong journey. Epiphany is more than the last of the twelve days of Christmas for this year, it is the celebration of the coming of the wise men seeking the Messiah.

The Bible doesn't record how many Magi - wise men came. We have always assumed that there were three as three gifts are mentioned. If you feel traumatized by this revelation, here is my suggestion to you: When someone shares something that challenges what you have always known to be true about the Bible or your beliefs, weigh it on your faith scale: If what has been told to you is true, does it change your knowledge and love for God through Jesus Christ.

I would like to think our faith doesn't hinge on how many wise men visited the Christ child. In fact, many miss the stories I shared last week in Luke, of Simeon and Anna, who were wise ones in their own way and saw Jesus as a baby and recognized his importance.

In Confirmation classes I explain that an epiphany is when you get a great insight. The AHA! Moment. Like a light bulb going off in your brain. The Magi brought gifts to the baby Jesus because something inside them told them to follow the star, the Messiah had arrived. Simeon and Anna knew their epiphany would be fulfilled in their lifetimes with the recognition of the right baby, the One. Their epiphany came before they arrived. They knew who they would find, though the circumstances must have surprised them.

Dictionary.com defines epiphany as a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple or commonplace occurrence or experience. Intuitive perception and insights describe for us how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. The words reality and essential meaning, tell us that it is for the important times of life. That it is presented in a simple or commonplace occurrence or experience reminds us that God is at work in and through the small stuff of our lives.

The epiphany moment is when the wise ones realize that indeed Jesus is the Son of God. God yearns to draw us back to our Creator through the One that God sent as a human baby to show us the way. We have to be sure to seek the unexpected, as the wise men finding Jesus in a common humble dwelling with two pretty normal parents;

Simeon and Anna finding the baby in the arms of parents going through the usual birth rituals of the Jewish faith. Beyond the inconveniently timed birth in a far off land, which ends in a rough looking birthplace, nothing in Jesus' beginnings would point to anything out of the ordinary, except the wise ones arrivals and proclamations; each of them knew - in the seeing that this was to be the Savior for the world.

One Epiphany Season, Rev. Dan Dick wrote in his blog "This is the capstone to the Christmas Narrative." It is the moment of confirmation to the wise ones who were seeking the Messiah. So we need to realize that the first step is to seek. We can't recognize him without the knowledge of who we are waiting for and that he will come again.

The Magi knew there would be a Messiah. These last stories of Christmas give the whole Christmas story importance, authenticity, truth and integrity. We don't acknowledge enough the importance of the Gospel writer's use of these end-of-Christmas stories to validate Jesus, the Son of God.

Dan Dick goes on to say: "It is only by our faith and the conviction of our hearts that we recognize Jesus." Christmas has come again and we need to seek the Messiah for ourselves, make room for him in our lives and nurture our relationship with him from an infant stage to a mature adult faith.

Who were these 'wise ones'? Astrologers, Astronomers, Magicians, the carol we sang, name them as kings. They knew the stars as a navigational system, they came with rich gifts, and they were from far away. But before they reached Herod, they were already searching. They didn't need him to tell them to search diligently; they were already on track in their quest. The Wise Men were committed to the journey, wherever the star might lead.

They brought with them, Gold, a rock, but of great value, used to buy whatever in life. A sign of royalty – acknowledging Christ, who would be a King over the people; Frankincense, which is a tree resin with a strong scent when burned, but difficult to get, and expensive to buy. Used by priests for incense during worship – it was a sign of Christ, who would be a priest for the people; and Myrrh, also a sap, gathered from a tree. This is only found in a few places in the world, similar to Frankincense. Myrrh is used as an incense, but it was also used to embalm the body after death – a sign of Christ, who would die for the people..

The gifts are all from natural, raw materials; simple and common place, but with great meaning to Joseph and Mary. The prophet Isaiah foretold of these gifts. Isaiah 60.1-6: *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.*

⁴ *Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.* ⁵ *Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

Think of what the wise ones did to find the child: For the Magi they put their savings into the gifts to bring; they traveled from a faraway place, sacrificing their time and comfort. For Simeon, who blessed the baby and Anna, whose words again acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, they had been deep in prayer and worship, long waiting for the Savior to come.

Though it was not an easy task, they were all compelled to do it because this was a culmination of their work and understanding. This moment fulfills part of God's mission, through them in history for our benefit. They simply brought what was precious, what they wanted to give to Jesus and the parents and to us.

They followed the star and the words of the prophet Isaiah, and they offered themselves. When the Magi arrived they dropped to their knees. Simeon held and blessed the baby, and Anna, saw this moment and began to spread the news of the coming of the Messiah.

Why did they come? Each one of us is seeking something bigger than ourselves. We want to experience God. When we come to know well about something, we watch for change that is out of the ordinary. We want a miracle, we want proof of God's power in the face of 'the Herods' of the world. The Magi knew something extra-ordinary was to happen and they wanted to be a part of it, even though it wasn't even a part of their culture.

For these people with an understanding of the sky, the star was like a GPS tracking device that brought them to the point and place of divine revelation. The trip was all mapped-out for them, leading them to a new understanding of God.

Simeon and Anna were within the Jewish culture and they wanted to know and share that the Savior, whom the people had waited for, over many centuries had arrived. When we keep seeking, through the scriptures and the common, simple signs given us, we will also just know when confronted with God as human, God as divine.

When we don't seek, the epiphany light bulb can't possibly go on. You have to have a good light bulb in order to receive. When a light bulb burns out – you have to change it. So, I did some research and here is what I found: How many United Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? "Four on the Light bulb Task Force Sub-committee, who report to the eight on the Light bulb Task Force, appointed by the eight on the Trustee Board. Their recommendation is reviewed by the Finance Committee of six.

If they approve, they bring a motion to the ten Member church Council, who appoint another four-member review committee. If they recommend that the Church Board proceed, a resolution is brought to the Congregation in a report at the next Charge Conference if the Congregation votes in favor, the responsibility to carry out the light bulb change is passed on to the Trustee Board, who in turn appoint a four-member committee to find the best price in new light bulbs.

Their recommendation of which hardware is the best buy must then be reviewed by the three-member Ethics Committee to make certain that this hardware store has no connection to anyone politically unworthy. They report back to the Trustee Board who then commissions the Trustee in charge of making the change. By then the Pastor discovers that one more light bulb has burned out.

That is what happens if we spend too much time in the details and never get to the seeking. Here is another one: How many United Methodists does it take to change a light bulb? Undetermined. Whether your light is bright, dull, or completely out, you are loved -- you can be a light bulb, turnip bulb, or tulip bulb. Church wide lighting service is planned for Pentecost Sunday, May 27. Bring bulb of your choice and a potluck dish. This also sounds all well and good, but we have to do more to diligently search...seeking God. We have to believe God's promises that Christ will come again and then seek that moment in time.

Herod was at the top of his game, he held the highest office in the land. He had his own epiphany when the Magi arrived before him. Imagine his elation when his staff informs him that royal visitors from the East have arrived at his gate. Did he puff-up thinking they had come to acknowledge and honor him? This epiphany was based on his desire to be the most important and hold all of the power. But they had come seeking another -- a child. His epiphany was not fulfilled and in his arrogance he was humiliated and enraged.

R. A. Culpepper, Dean at McAfee School of Theology. Atlanta, Georgia says: "A new era was dawning, but those who had the scriptures [the Jewish leaders] missed it because they did not join with the magi in their quest." They lived at the center of Jewish power, they knew the foretelling of the Messiah, but they didn't recognize or get wind of the truth of the scriptures, the actual coming of the Savior. Years later, when they do realize Jesus is the One, they lash out in defensive fear. Clearly God was at work, not at the center of power, but with those willing to seek a Messiah, the Savior.

The story tells of two epiphanies, two 'Ah Ha' moments of new understanding for the Magi. The first was the power of the moment when they arrived. They didn't know what they might find when they arrived, or even indeed where they might arrive. Surely, they didn't expect what they did find. Even though they expected something spectacular -- it probably wasn't this.

These long traveled magi would see the humility of the stable. They would also recognize the irony of a Messiah being born there, and see past it to the royalty of this child. When they arrived it says they first paid the child homage, they humbled themselves to their knees to worship Jesus in their awe. Then they shared the rich gifts they had brought for the occasion.

Our search includes worship, where we seek the light, when we ask Christ to 'Shine in our darkness'. Or has the Church light dimmed? Are we no longer waiting for the coming of Christ in our lives, and in our church and in our world? When we arrive, those epiphany moments when God takes us beyond our understanding to a new understanding, we should be the light shining forth for others, inviting them to 'search diligently.' To join us in the warm glow of God's light given us in Jesus Christ - especially during Christmas.

Christmas Eve Candlelight here at Hayward UMC included over 75 people. While we sang Silent Night by candlelight, there was a love light shining strong in this sanctuary, as in many churches that evening. If you had been on the outside of the building, I wonder if you would have been enticed to come in and search diligently for the light of God come to earth in a human child?

How many of you have told someone about your experience since that night? How many of you invited someone to come to worship that night? How many of you will invite someone to come next year? Or is there a Herod in your heart that will talk you out of it? Hear this: "Love that is true, shines brightest in the shade."

If you felt the awe of Christmas Eve, take the opportunity of this new year to share that gift with someone. They may be sitting in the darkness or living in the dimness of forgotten hope, waiting for the Christ that lives in you to touch their lives. You might be their wise one; Bringing them an epiphany. Our finest gift may be to speak of who Christ is for us – creating the epiphany for someone else, it may even be a fulfillment of our purpose.

The star the Magi followed led them to Herod first and then to Christ. We wonder why they had to stop for Herod on the way to the manger. But it relates to the realities of life, that the journey isn't always a smooth, straight road. What we get from the story is more than the birth of the Savior for our lives. Matthew gives us the words 'search diligently' to be pondered, examined and lived out in our lives.

The second Epiphany for these wise ones was a knowledge in their hearts that they must return home by a different route than the one they came. Did the star fade after they arrived? It wouldn't take them home again. It was needed for one purpose: to get them there. They were needed for one purpose to search diligently in order for the world throughout the rest of time to acknowledge the kingship of this child. The Star led them, and then the star went out, internally – a light inside them.

Another new era is dawning. Like the star, our church should be a beacon of light, shining brightly through these windows, bringing us and others outside the windows, to the point and place of divine revelation. We should be today's wise ones – searching our hearts for the Christ child and as the wise ones of old, inviting others along on the journey.

PRAY: for the Star of Christ to lead us as we seek.