

“Epiphany - Theophany”

Matthew 2:1-20

January 5, 2020

PRAY

This is a new year, coming to us with the anticipation of high hopes, big dreams, and great surprises! How have you begun the year? Time with family? Time watching movies?

A few years ago there was a Netflix commercial, where a young girl told the steps to watching a movie with the family: Step one: Make some popcorn. Step two: Have a good time. Step three: Choose a movie. Step four: Try to agree. Step five: Watch it together. Step six: When the movie is over you guys can talk about it. And that’s all. Then the tagline of the commercial: “The movie is just the beginning!”

I appreciated how she had ordered all of the important parts with a method, but then, once again I say: “That is why I make such a good Method-ist.” This seems to be a good way to approach all of the important things in our lives.

It is easy with the Christmas scriptures to just look at the surface of them, as we have heard them year after year and let it be enough with the excitement and celebration around them. But what will we find if we dig deeper and apply the Word to our own lives.

Today is the twelfth day of Christmas, tomorrow, Jan 6, is Epiphany, so there is still some time to consider questions of how the Wise Men can affect our lives. Let’s begin with the word Epiphany. Written with a capital ‘E’ it refers to Jan 6 and the surprise of the wise men that they really did find a baby king.

Written with a small ‘e’ it refers to an experience of sudden and striking insight. Epiphany is often used interchangeably with the word Theophany; Theo meaning God, theophany meaning ‘to see God.’ We can talk about and celebrate the big ‘E’ Epiphany, we can even experience in our lives the small ‘e’ epiphanies, but we don’t make them happen. Yet to experience a theophany – to see God, you have to have yourself prepared.

I now propose a few steps: A. If you get close enough to God; B. No matter who you are; C. You may see God. For the Hebrew people of the Old Testament when they worshipped God and paid attention, things went well; when they turned from God, things fell apart. They were the chosen people of God, but even they didn’t always pay attention to their Creator. When they did, they could see God and know that God was working in their lives.

So let’s take a look at King Herod: Some would say that Herod was at the top of his game. He held a position of importance, but wasn’t content with that. He wanted more and his desire for power, made him a poor leader. As he was never content, his chief priests and scribes were always on edge as well. They were unsure when the the ‘wise men’, these rich, important intellectual philosophers entered the city.

Surely, when they told Herod of the arrival, he assumed that these men of brilliance and prestige, who had traveled for months, had come to get to know him better and honor him in some way. After all, he was the most important person in all of Jerusalem. Herod may have believed this was the next important step up for himself.

Imagine his great disappointment to find they had not come to see him, but to get direction to a different one, a child, they felt was of greater importance...

*"They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."*

Herod's arrogance was quickly replaced with humiliation. His ego-driven expression changed. Imagine his disappointment and fear of what his people would think - that a baby was born and a star had been placed in the heavens to announce the arrival, but it was not for Herod...

Because he didn't know the Hebrew history, he called for his advisors – who may now have been shaking in their boots as to what was to happen next. (There is a lot of fear and trembling in the Christmas story.) Herod spent his life only getting close to himself. Even he, could have known God, but the only God that Herod could see was himself.

So we come to the wise men. They traveled many, many miles; they were from another world. Astronomers, they had studied the celestial objects; astrologers, they believed that there was a relationship between astronomical phenomena and events in the human world. So first of all they were men who had been studying. They knew their history. They hadn't merely stumbled on to this significant event.

They had searched their own traditions and their own holy texts, and the results of their studying was a readiness, or at least a willingness, to recognize the sign of the star when it appeared. Second, these scholars didn't just have their noses in the books. They were also eager observers of the world around them.

Without those two characteristics, knowing the prophecies, and being observant of their contemporary world, the Epiphany might well have been missed by these people. Instead they created for us mystery, hymns and imaginative details in our story.

Third, they were willing to pursue the answer to the star that they had discovered in their study. They went after the answer behind the prophecy and the star, actually making the journey to discover the truth. To be proven right or wrong – was a risk in itself.

Fourth, They were willing to try confirming their directions as they went, assuming that the local King, Herod' would know if they were indeed on the right path. That was a poor move, but made for the right reasons. Fifth, having found the truth of what they believed in the child and his mother, Mary, they responded with all of the gratitude that they had in them. In awe they gave the most valuable of their treasures.

Sixth, after seeing God in the child, and fulfilling their hopes, they still stayed vigilant and aware. Herod awaited news from them, but they were now open to insights and dreams that took them past Herod and on home.

These learned men were not of the Hebrew faith. Far from it, they practiced the mystical crafts handed down from even more ancient times – predating Moses. Jews and later, Christians regarded their 'arts' as deceptive, even dangerous. They were not waiting expectantly for a Savior, but noting significant changes in the stars and in the political climates of their times and considering their importance.

Centuries later, the medieval writers believed that these Magi saw a bright angel, which they mistook for a star; but that angel led them to the manger. The star mystery is still a wonder to today's astronomers. Augustine wrote: "Christ was not born because the star shone forth, but the star shone forth because Christ was born." Or as Dante put it in the Divine Comedy "God is 'the love that moves the stars'".

The tragic comedy of this story is underlined by the way that Matthew places side by side the magi over against King Herod's Bible scholars. The scripture experts have the scrolls; but they miss the Messiah's birth – and when they began to realize the truth of the scriptures, they began to help plot against the baby, the one they supposedly were waiting for.

Even today, we might ask: Do we ever hold the truth in our hands but miss the living Lord? God is determined to be found, and will use anything it takes, even waywardness, like astrology, to reach out to people who are open. One of my favorite Christmas sayings is "Wise Ones seek him still!"

Often the writers today make it seem like you just need the right attitude to see God. But our example from Matthew is a need to know about God to fully experience the Epiphanies. Do we study our history, searching our sacred texts, resulting in a readiness or at least a willingness to recognize the sign when it appears?

Do we do more than just study, more than just listen on Sunday mornings in church, by applying what we hear and believe, to what we observe in the world? Or do we miss seeing God because we are not watching the signs?

Are we ready to check out the mysteries God brings us, knowing that sometimes we will find the truth of and some we will just have to trust that God knows and we can't? Can we be ready to give thanks in all circumstances, even the painful ones, because we know that God can be seen most clearly when we surrender ourselves to the mystery, especially when we don't, or can't understand?

Our gift to God is our acknowledgement when we have seen God. Life is different then and we are never the same. It is the knowledge that we can turn to our Creator with our joys and our concerns without any fear. In this way we live out our faith.

As the little girl in the Netflix commercial said: "Step six: when the movie is over you guys can talk about it." If we imagine the conversations on the long return journey home for the magi, we might hear: "Did that all really happen?" Seeing God is no small event...They would review the event and compare notes. In doing that they, like us, then want to retell the Good News and we, like them, become even more open to whatever is about to come next.

The magi didn't come to study Jesus. They came to worship a newborn king by following a special star. Sacrificing time and comfort, they brought gifts to a baby who demonstrated no outward signs of confirmation to the predicted life he would lead as God's Son.

They held no assurances to how the story would turn out. All they had was prophetic knowledge of a star and a coming Messiah. Reflected in their eyes was this child of a family with limited means, in very modest surroundings, lying in a teenage mother's arms.

At this sight, these learned scholars could not perceive a formula for future success. Yet, by grace, these wise ones had the faith to experience unrestrained joy. They beheld the substance of things hoped for and humbled themselves to worship this gift of God. Jesus was the promise of salvation for the world and the gift of joy that sent the wise ones home by another way.

T.S. Eliot imagined the thoughts of the magi back home: "We returned to our places...but no longer at ease here, in the old [indulgences, living] with an alien people clutching their gods." Once we have seen God, Jesus does not make our lives more comfortable; Jesus doesn't help us fit into society or to succeed in a worldly way.

If fact we are no longer at ease in a world not committed to one God; we notice false gods all over the place. We detect royal pretenders like Herod. Nothing is ever the same; nothing comes easy. A strange, unfamiliar road is now our path – but the road is going somewhere, for we have had an Epiphany and a Theophany; we have seen God!

PRAY