

Magi Sermon
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I had lunch with an
old college friend recently
and was surprised to hear her
use a Christian term
to describe her rather
loathsome ex boyfriend.

“I had an Epiphany
about Lawrence.” She said.
“He’s an idiot.”

Now my surprise
wasn’t over the fact
that she thought Lawrence
was an idiot.
I know many who might agree.

My surprise was that she used
the word Epiphany.
I asked her what she meant.

She meant of course
that she had had
a rather giant revelation,
a sudden enlightenment.

I of course, found it fascinating
that she used this word
with almost no understanding
of what it meant
as a Christian term or season,
a season in fact
that we are nearly upon.

Epiphany in the Christian sense
means "manifestation",
often of divine power.
We celebrate Epiphany
on January 6th,
the day the magi visited
Jesus in Bethlehem.

Because that is when
God's love in Christ
Was revealed to the world,
Especially to the gentiles.

Epiphany is the celebration
of the mystery contained
in today's gospel,
the revelation of God
to mankind in human form.

Epiphany is the final celebration
that bridges the
end of the Christmas season
and the beginning of
the season of epiphany
that lasts until lent.

And so, today
is the last Sunday
of the season
that celebrates Christ's birth
into the world,
a birth that cannot
be understood
if one does not
leave the stable
and move toward
three kings bearing gifts.

It's true that
much of the world
Will not move
beyond the manger.

They stay kneeling
in front of a newborn king
for one day and never
look back as they
leave the holy family
intact and entombed
in a perpetual birth scene
that offers little more
than sentiment
in their daily world.

But in the Christian season,
we celebrate
not only a newborn
but the mystery
and meaning of that birth.

We often say we are
a resurrection people,
which nods to the importance
and life giving salvation of Easter.

But we are also a people
of the incarnation,
the mystery of God's choosing
to not only call to us always,
but to come to us as one of us.

The Epiphany celebrates
God's revelation
Of that incarnation.

William Barclay says that
"When Jesus Christ
came, the world
was in an eagerness
of expectation.

Men and women
were waiting for god,
and the desire for God
was in their hearts.

They had discovered
that they could not build
the golden age without God.
It was to a waiting world
that Jesus came;
and when he came,
the ends of the earth
were gathered
at his cradle.
It was the first sign
and symbol of the world
conquest of Christ."

In today's gospel story

the dark world is blessed
by those who watch the skies for light.

The Magi, or Magoi
were for Persia
what the Levites were
for the Jews,
a holy priesthood
of advisors and prophets.

Barclay, calls them
men of holiness and wisdom.
“These magi were men
who were skilled
in philosophy,
medicine and
natural science.

They were soothsayers
and interpreters of dreams.
And ... at their best the Magi
were good and holy men,
who sought for truth.”

The Magi watched
the skies for signs.

In those times, the skies
were God’s vehicle
for signs and wonders.
The stars were ordered
and could be observed.

Any changes,
any new bursts of light
could be noted and attributed
to god’s transforming the old
into the new.

Many theologians
and astronomers
have offered suggestions
for what light was seen
at the time of Jesus birth.

It was a light so great

that the magi of the east
could note it and follow it
to its purpose in Bethlehem.

Around 11 BC Halley's comet
was visible shooting across the skies.
Around 7 BC Saturn and Jupiter
shone brightly together.

In the years 5-2 BC
in the first day of the Egyptian
month of Messori,
Sirius the dog star
rose at sunrise and
shone with
exceptional brilliance.

Interestingly,
the name of the month,
Messori means
the birth of a prince.

Whatever light they saw,
the magi,
knew by the light
of a new star that
a new king was being
born into the world.

Now, not everyone
embraced this new light.
Especially King Herod.

King Herod the great
was not well liked.

He was half Jew
and half Edomite.
He ingratiated himself
with the Romans
which left him reviled
by his subjects.

Most importantly,
the older Herod became,
the more suspicious

and violent he became.

Out of jealousy and suspicion,
he murdered his mother
his wife and
three of his sons.

Any who opposed him
were imprisoned
and it was said that it was
safer to be Herod's pig
than to be his son.

It is no surprise then
that upon hearing
a child had been born
that might be hailed
as a new king by the nations
of the world, well,
Herod felt a little threatened.

He responds in fear and hate,
with plans to kill the child,
and all infants of a certain age.

It is said that there are only
three ways to respond
to an epiphany of Christ.

Once we are given
the astounding revelation
of God's love for us in Christ,
we have a choice.

We can respond as Herod does,
in fear and hatred.
Herod is so full of darkness
that news of this good light
prompts him to turn
to the priests and scribes,
the scriptural experts
to learn enough about
the covenant prophecies
to find the child and assassinate
his threat.

There are still those
in the world who respond
to God's love and presence
in fury and anguish.

We can also respond
with indifference.
The priests and scribes,
who had lovingly tended
God's prophecies and scrolls
for centuries do not allow
the star or the magi
to change their routine.

Their hearts do not quicken
in hope that at last God's promise
has come to live among them.
You would never know
that the kingdom had come near
and beckoned.
This is how much
of our world lives now.

Finally, we can respond
As the Magi did,
in adoration and worship.
The magi saw the star,
assumed the risky endeavor
of travel and tracking it
to find the newborn king.

They brought with them
their hearts and hopes
and laid them at the cradle
along with their finest
gifts and offerings.

We too bring gifts
to the cradle.
We bring ourselves,
our hearts and minds,
our deepest fears
and our secret desires.

But while we are
at the cradle,

we realize,
as the magi did,
that this infant
represents possibilities
and growth and change
that we cannot imagine.

We cannot capture
his purpose
or define him,
he is God among us
and he is mystery
and majesty
and more than we
can ever know.

It is this epiphany,
this understanding
of Christ that takes us
from the manger
and the limited understanding
of a baby's birth
and flings us to the dangerous road
of escape to Egypt and Nazareth
and finally Golgotha.

And we know that
the unknowable
love of God
not only stands
in the doorway
beckoning us to him,

but actually crosses
the threshold of the world
and come among us
as flesh and blood.

This is what gives meaning
to the birth of our Lord,
the realization
that God came among us
as the light of the world
that leads us away from
Christ's birth
and on to the cross.

May the love of God
in Jesus Christ bring us
to the light,
lost in wonder,
love and praise. Amen.