

January 7, 2018

Epiphany 2018

Everyone is Welcome

Matthew 12:1-12

Opening words: Today, we begin a new liturgical season, Epiphany. It is one of those words that is only used by preachers and theologians. Epiphany means "manifestation." During this season, we celebrate the fact that Christ came for all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Sin has no exclusive hold on either group. All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. The actual date of Epiphany was yesterday, January 6. However, in most western churches, Epiphany is the following Sunday. That is today. Our scripture reading for today is traditional, the story of the Magi.

In 1857, John Henry Hopkins Jr. wrote one of the greatest Christmas Carols in the history of the church, *We Three Kings*. At the time, Hopkins served as the rector of the Christ Episcopal Church in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. However, he wrote the carol for a Christmas pageant in New York City. The carol is a combination of Bible and tradition. Tradition, not Bible, tells us there were three kings. Tradition, not Bible, tells us the names of the three kings. If you picture your nativity set, you can see them. Melchior was an old gray-headed man with a long white beard. He brought the gold, the gift for a king. Caspar was young and beardless. He brought the frankincense, the gift for a priest. The myrrh, the gift for one who was going to die, was brought by Balthasar, who was dark-complexioned. That is interesting, but that is not Bible. We are a Biblical church, which means we are only interested in what the Bible says about the Magi (not kings). Our Gospel reading for today is Matthew 2:1-12. Let me call this message *Everyone is Welcome*.

Matthew 2:1-12 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child

was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Brian Tracy once said, *"The greatest gift that you can give to others is the gift of unconditional love and acceptance."* I know that is true because I have experienced it in my life. If you find that quote to be true, say, **"Amen!"**

We find ourselves this morning in the Gospel of Matthew. For generations, the church believed Matthew, the former tax collector, disciple and apostle, wrote this Gospel. Now, some have questions. It was written between the year A.D. 50 and 60, in Palestine. The recipients were Greek speaking Jews. Of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Matthew is the most Jewish in nature. Matthew wrote this Gospel for one reason, to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus was the Messiah.

In the second chapter of Matthew, we find the story of the Magi. The Bible says it happened after Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea. So, Jesus was born five miles south of Jerusalem. Matthew goes on to pinpoint the date. It was when King Herod sat on the throne. He sat on the throne for thirty-three years, from 37 - 4 B.C. He was appointed to his position by the Roman Senate. Over two thousand years later, he is still remembered for being ruthless and insecure. His insecurity led him to murder many in his family: his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law and uncles. In our reading for today, we learn his murderous ways extended beyond the family. You know what the Bible says. One day, Magi, Gentile astrologers from Persia or southern Arabia, (both east of Palestine), came to visit Herod. They had been studying the stars and had discovered that God was doing something new. A baby had been born, who was called King of the Jews. They assumed the King of the Jews would be born in the palace. They assumed wrong. The infamous insecure King Herod is thrown into a tirade. His insecurity fuels the loss of more human life. The story does not have a happy ending. It pains me to say it. Using the information received from the Magi about this divine birth, he orders the death of all baby boys under the age of two. However, in the end, the Magi find the baby, now a toddler. (Jesus could have been two years old.) If any of this sounds familiar, say, **"Amen!"**

I have preached this story for years, but it is only recently I discovered something new. It is something I have overlooked my entire life. It is not that Jesus was a toddler, not a newborn. It is not that they were Magi, not kings. It is not the meaning behind the gifts. My new insight was that the gifts were accepted. It is hard to see thousands of years later. Joseph and Mary received the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Think about it for moment. When you accept a gift, you are accepting the gift giver. Joseph and Mary accepted the Magi's gifts, so they were accepting the Magi themselves. It doesn't sound so earthshaking now, but it was then. This Jewish couple accepted this

group of Gentiles. That rarely, if ever, happened. At the time of this story, accepting the Magi was, and is, a big deal. Just think about it for a moment.

From the time of Abraham to the time of Jesus, God had an exclusive relationship with the Jews. That covers thousands of years. The Hebrew nation took pride in the fact that they were God's Chosen People. The purity of their race was important to them. They took pride in their heritage and their disdain for everyone else. Either you were a Jew, or you were not. That is why genealogies were important to them. In the previous chapter, Matthew proves to the readers, Jews, that Jesus was 100% Jewish. That is why the Jews hated the Samaritans. They were almost Jewish, not good enough. Who were the Samaritans? They were the descendants of former Jews who had intermarried with Gentiles during the exile. Through Jewish eyes, they were half-breeds and hated for polluting the race. The purity of the race is extremely important to the Jews. That is what makes this story so amazing. This Jewish couple, Joseph and Mary, accept these Gentiles, the Magi. Not only do they accept them, but they accept their gifts. Can I ask you a question? When was the last time you didn't feel accepted? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" In the Bible lesson for today, the issue is racism. We understand racism because sadly, it is still part of our world.

I have never experienced the magic of Pittsburgh. Some people see it as a magical place. Some believe, heaven looks a great deal like Pittsburgh. I am not one of them. Don't get me wrong. There are a few nice streets crowded in between the rivers and the hills. Can I confess something to you? I can never drive into Pittsburgh and not get lost. I am always going the wrong way on a one-way street. It is my experience that modern GPS is useless in Pittsburgh.

Several years ago, I was going to visit someone in one of the hospitals in Pittsburgh. Kathryn came along for company. Not to my surprise, we got lost. I break the stereotype and ask for directions when I get lost. Kathryn was driving, so I jumped out of the car. The closest place to ask for directions was a corner bar. When I walked in the place, it went silent. I don't want to sound racist, but the place went silent because I was the only person of non-color in the bar. I asked the first person I saw for directions. He was helpful. He pulled out a napkin that sat under his frosted beer mug and wrote down some directions. When I walked out, everyone started laughing. Racism is at the heart of that story and racism is at the heart of our Bible story. However, racism is not the only source of the problem. There are many reasons why we don't accept others. Let me ask you the question again: When was the last time you didn't feel accepted?

Over two months ago, I officiated at a wedding of a couple just south of here. Neither the bride nor the groom are part of this church. I knew the groom because he had traveled to Russia with us several years ago. I was honored when they asked me, and I looked forward to their wedding. As is the custom, they had a rehearsal, followed by a rehearsal dinner. Kathryn and I were invited to the dinner. When we walked into the place, it was filled with people. The groom's parents showed us to our table in the

corner. We sat there alone and watched the crowd. One by one, couples walked up to us and sat down. One by one the couples left, when the question was asked, what do you do for a living? It is a painful thing to sit with a preacher. The only guy who stayed with us wanted to know how I felt about Judas Iscariot. A few minutes later, his wife rushed him off too. Kathryn and I sat there alone in the crowd. Have you ever been excluded because of your job? Let me ask you the question again. When was the last time you didn't feel accepted? You know it is true. Sometimes, we exclude ourselves because we don't feel like we belong.

Last Sunday morning, Kathryn and I were in Annapolis, Maryland. Personally, I find New Year's Eve to be depressing, after the great day of Christmas. We always go somewhere and this year we went to Annapolis. It was a great trip. We toured the Naval Academy and visited some historic sites. Annapolis was the Capitol of the United States for the first eight months after the Revolution. From Annapolis it moved to Trenton, New Jersey. The last day of our trip we went into Baltimore and toured the B & O Railroad Museum.

The last thing we did was go to a mansion called Evergreen. It was the home of one the B & O CEO's. The building was impressive, filled with priceless art and collectibles. Our guide tried to impress us with all the pieces. Everyone was impressed, except for one person in the group, me. I just didn't appreciate the various pieces. Don't get me wrong. I have been exposed to some of the finest things in life. I have heard some of the finest music ever composed performed by some of the world's finest orchestras. I have seen masterpieces in some of the finest art galleries in the world. The problem is not a lack of exposure, it is a lack of appreciation. Everyone on our tour appreciated what they were experiencing, except me. Once again, I was alone in a crowd. The guide and the group did nothing wrong. The problem wasn't them, it was me. I didn't feel like I belonged. By the end of the tour, people were sharing what they enjoyed the most in the house. Do you know what I enjoyed most? It was a photograph of Kaiser Wilhelm. I really admired his large mustache. I just didn't fit in with the rest of the group. It is entirely possible to exclude yourself. Let me ask you the question one more time. When was the last time you didn't feel accepted? If you will admit there has been a time in your life when you didn't feel accepted, say, "**Amen!**" That is what makes this morning's story so incredible.

It is a story of acceptance. A Jewish couple, Joseph and Mary, are accepting a group of Gentiles. They aren't just accepting them, they are emotionally embracing them by accepting their gifts. Here is the Good News for today: You are accepted too. Jesus didn't just come to maintain God's special relationship with the Jews. Jesus came so everyone can have a relationship with God. Jesus came so God can have a relationship with you. Never forget it. God loves you so much, he wants to spend eternity with you! Brian Tracy said it best, "*The greatest gift that you can give someone is the gift of unconditional love and acceptance.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"