

January 3, 2020

Epiphany Sunday
Discipleship 101
Matthew 2:1-12

Opening words: Epiphany is this Wednesday, January 6. That will be the twelfth day of Christmas. We will observe Epiphany today. The liturgical season of Epiphany will not end until Ash Wednesday, February 17. The word *Epiphany* means “manifestation.” Epiphany is the season we celebrate the divine truth, that Christ came for all people, not just the Jews. In some traditions, only the visit of the Magi is remembered. In other traditions, the visit of the Magi and the baptism of Jesus are remembered. Regardless, both events are significant because they emphasize the significance of Jesus.

Epiphany is celebrated differently around the world. In Spain, special pastries are eaten. In France, a flat almond cake is baked in the shape of a crown. In Mexico, a figure of the baby Jesus is baked inside of a cake. Whoever finds that figure is called the Godparent of the baby Jesus for that year. In Portugal, special carols are sung. In Italy, children receive Epiphany gifts, which were delivered by a fictitious old woman. In Germany, people chalk their doors to remind them of the visit of the Magi. In Ethiopia, Epiphany is celebrated with a three-day festival. How are you planning on celebrating Epiphany this year? Part of your celebration must include our reading for today, Matthew 2:1-12. Let me call this message *Discipleship 101*.

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.

In 1857, John Henry Hopkins Jr. (1820-1891) wrote one of the great hymns 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, Then, 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). So, what does the Bible?

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. The combination of the uninvited visitors and the insecure king produced one of the greatest stories in the Bible.

The story of the Magi is rich in many ways. I preach on this text annually. I looked at my past sermons from the past decade. Through the years I have looked at this story from several different angles. Maybe you remember one of these themes. In the past, I have looked at the odd gifts they presented the toddler Jesus. They were gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. In the past, I have looked at the symbolism that surrounds the Magi. They were Gentiles, non-Jews, entering a Jewish world. However, in God's plan of salvation of the world everyone, even Gentiles, are welcomed. The Magi represent us! In the past, I have used the Magi to illustrate a cruel point. Life is hard! Why did innocent babies have to die? That fact upsets me. Today, I want to look at the Magi from a different angle.

The Magi illustrate for us the basics in discipleship. That is important because we are in the discipleship making business. Do you remember the mission statement of this church? Western Reserve will develop disciples who reflect Christ's love through worship, fellowship, and service. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. So, what the Magi did to become a disciple we must do. They did three distinct things once they

found Jesus. Each one is found in the story. If you are ready to look at them say, **"Amen!"**

First, the Magi bowed down! Look at the text with me. The entire story revolves around a group of tired travelers, the Magi. Here is a question you must answer. Who are the Magi? Many have been trying to answer that question for years. It will suffice to say they were spiritual astrologers. By studying the stars, they had discovered that the king of the Jews had been born. Their knowledge of the stars is impressive, but their understanding of the scriptures is limited. They assumed the king would be born in the capital, Jerusalem. The scriptures tell us he would be born in Bethlehem. That single mistake ignited the insecurities of the present king, Herod. However, it is Herod who sends them in the right direction. When they arrive, we are told they bowed down and worshipped Jesus. (Verse 11) By then, Mary and Joseph are no longer staying in the4 barn or manger. They have moved to a house. However, this is a more important question. What does it mean to bow down? It means the Magi, with all their worldly influence and power, were humbling themselves before Christ. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, then you must humble yourself before him. How humble are you?

The late Dawson Trotman (1906-1956), founder of the Navigators, was visiting Taiwan on one of his overseas trips. During the visit he hiked with a Taiwanese pastor back into one of the mountain villages to meet with some of the national Christians. The roads and trails were wet, and their shoes became very muddy. Later, someone asked this Taiwanese pastor what he remembered most about Dawson Trotman. Without hesitation the man replied, "He cleaned my shoes." So, this is my question for you. How will you be remembered? Will you be remembered as a prideful person? Will you be remembered as a humble person? If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, then you must be humble. Do the people in your life consider you humble? If that makes you think say, **"Amen!"**

Second, the Magi opened-up! Look at the text with me again. The Magi did not just bow down. They also offered him gifts. There was gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each one of the gifts reveals something about the life that Jesus is going to live. The gold was a gift for a king. The frankincense was a gift for a priest. The myrrh was a gift for one who was going to die. The gifts reveal the Magi's insight, but the gifts also reveal the Magi's generosity. One of the great secrets of the Bible is, what happened to the gifts? Many believed they were sold to pay for life because life has always been expensive. The Magi gave their best. If you want to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, then you must give him your best for the business disciple making. How much of your life are you giving?

There is the 90/10 Principle. I have spoken of it in the past. I repeat it because you need to hear it. It is not a complex principle. It simply says, 90% of the work done and 90% of the money given is done and given by 10% of the people. It does not just

happen here. It happens in every church. So, this is the question you must answer. Are you part of the 10% who does or gives 90% or are you part of the 90% who does or gives 90%? The answer is obvious. Are you proud of your answer or are you ashamed of your answer? The Magi were generous with their time, they looked for Jesus for years. The Magi were generous with their money, they gave expensive gifts. Do the people in your life consider you a generous person when it comes to the disciple making element of the church? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**" The Magi bowed down. The Magi opened-up.

Third, the Magi changed! Look at the text with me one final time. The time came for the Magi to go home. They had experienced the king of the Jews and were ready to go home. They were prepared to go home in the same way that they came. There is no reason to believe they would have changed their itinerary, but they have a dream that warns them to go home a different way. Verse 12 says, "*They returned home by another route.*" Jesus had changed their normal way, and they tried a new way. How much is Jesus changing your life? Are you willing to try something new?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) called it "cheap grace." It is when grace is experienced in your life, but there is no discipleship. It is grace without price; it is grace with cost. It is grace without change. How many people do you know proclaim to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, but they refuse to change? They expect to go to heaven, but they refuse to forgive or love unconditionally. How much has the Gospel changed your life? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**" The Magi bowed down! The Magi opened-up! The magi changed!

I heard this week 84% of all Americans kept their New Year's resolutions to some degree from last year. So, let me ask you the question. What is your New Year's Resolution? I am not the first one to ask it. The people at GoSkills.com say these are the most common New Year's resolutions:

1. Exercise More
2. Lose Weight
3. Get Organized
4. Learn a New Skill or Hobby
5. Live Life to the Fullest
6. Save More Money
7. Quit Smoking
8. Spend More Time with Family and Friends

Is any of those your New Year's Resolution?

This is my New Year's Resolution. This year I am going to more like the Magi. I am going to take my discipleship more seriously. I am going to humble myself. I am going to be more generous. I am going to be more open to God leading. I hope you are going to be more like the Magi too. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) was an American

revivalist. He once wrote, "*Resolution One: I will live for God. Resolution Two: If no one else does, I still will.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"