

Readings - Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-9

Matthew 2:1-12

Journey in Hope

Perhaps like me you have heard this story of the wise one's journey in some fashion or another all the years of your life. Perhaps you come to epiphany with little expectation, maybe for you this day is just an annoying extension of a holiday that is already over. Or perhaps you have come to see epiphany as the key to the celebration of Christmas. Without this piece the story is not over. Whether you hold the story of the wise men, magi or astrologers coming to Jesus as historic or symbolic I don't really mind but the question we are to ask when we read the biblical text is "what does it mean for us today?"

What does the story of the journey of the magi have to do with the journey of our lives today? We have just heard the story of wise men from the East searching out and finding the Christ Child. We hear this reading every feast of Epiphany. "The word 'epiphany' simply means 'showing' or 'shining forth.' Divine light shines forth from this Child. But it should not so much be understood as the appearance of God as the transference of God. The divine light that shines in the Child is not a foreign light to the earth. It is the Light at the heart of all life. It is the Light from which all things come. If somehow this Light were extracted from the universe, everything would cease to exist. So this is a story about the Light at the heart of everything, the Light at the heart of you, the Light at the heart of me.

Look around you now at the people next to you, at the life forms growing from the earth, at the radiance of the sun or the whiteness of the moon. And look also into your own heart. There in all things is the Light. Maybe it is deeply hidden under confusions or falsenesses. But it is there, waiting to come forth anew. In the Christ Child this Light shines. He is our epiphany, our showing. In him we see the Light of life."¹ I have often thought that perhaps one of the reasons God chose Jesus to come just as we all did as a babe is because it is so much easier for us all to see light in a child. It's easy to see the hope and joy bubbling in the sparkling eyes of a babe. When we baptise the young girls we did this morning we have hopes and dreams for them to have a life full of love and light. It is much harder for us to look

¹ The Rev. Dr. John Philip Newell "The Light Within All Life"

at adults in that way. We are much more judgmental of people older than a young babe, unfortunately we often even carry less hope for them.

One of the things about our faith is whether we are in dark times or times of light the stories are always about searching for more. So it is in our epiphany story. It is a story that invites us to open our eyes to the light that is everywhere.

Epiphany day that reminds us to embrace the journey of life and faith. When we embark on a journey - if we really choose to step into the journey not only are we living into our faith story, but we are living in hope. And although it may feel a little numb and a little scary, if we really believe we will live in hope and light.

“Isaiah says that dark times are to be expected. The prophet proclaims that God’s people are blessed with hope-filled light from the Holy one, a light to be shared, a light that will attract other people.”² Do we believe that for ourselves or for our little congregation?

Firstly, This is a story about following stars and paying attention to dreams. Which is pretty different from how most of us in the Western world have been trained to see? “The second thing is that this is a story about finding light way beyond the boundaries of what is familiar to us, beyond the boundaries of our nation, beyond the boundaries of our religion.”³

Few of us spend a lot of time paying attention to dreams, and letting them guide us on our way. I however in life have learned that there are a lot of ways in which we can hear from God and dreams and visions may just may be one of them. Often these are found when paying attention to the message the universe is telling us.

Dan Chambers asked in a Epiphany sermon once “What inspired the magi to make the journey?”⁴ We know they followed a star, but why? Why would they risk such a journey. “They were, after all, traveling from the East, from Arabia or Mesopotamia, which would have been a long and hard journey of hundreds of miles, fraught with danger. Carrying expensive cargo they would have been prime targets for highway robbers.”⁵

² Gathering Jan 6 Epiphany 2010

³ Newell

⁴ Chambers Dan, Jan 2, 2000 sermon

⁵ IBID

Was it prestige? Honor? Fame? Were they trying to get in good with Herod? They were on a journey to see a babe that had been born in a barn in the little town of Bethlehem. This inconvenient journey was a little crazy let's be honest. So something in them must have been living in hope. A part of them must have believed there was something more out there. And somehow they must have been drawn towards the presence of light even in the midst of a very dark world and time.

Whatever the reason for their journey we know one thing for sure - something Holy was taking place. Because no matter how you read this story it is a story about encountering something holy, something that is extraordinary and connects us to the deepest and truest parts of God and ourselves. This is a story that finds a way to connect the heavens and the earth, the divine and the human. We know this because as they arrived at this place to meet this child those who would normally be honoured did the honouring. When they arrived in that place they were overwhelmed with joy. And when they saw Mary and Jesus they knelt down and paid him homage. And then they gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. These wise ones were not on a journey towards individual recognition and fame they were on a journey of hope, of self-sacrifice, of emptying and a search for the divine.

What took them on their journey was a hope-filled expectance to encounter the holy. "In their wisdom, the magi journeyed to Bethlehem in order to know that which grounds all experience. The deep called the deep within the magi, and they journeyed to encounter that which is beyond time;"⁶ and space and the world which they had come to know.

The magi went on a journey of hope-filled discovery and I would venture to say that in their sacred encounter with this holy family their lives were changed. "If they didn't know this before, they knew after encountering Jesus that God pervades all things." If you met them on their journey home and asked them what they saw they might have glowed with holy faces themselves as they shared of the child they had just met from God, a "child who reminded them that God is with us in all things." If you had looked confused they might have told you a parable "We are like a fish in water. The fish, by all appearances, is not conscious of the water that surrounds them. It is their environment, they swim in it and eat from it, are born in it and die in it but are apparently unaware of the water itself. Take the fish out of

⁶ Chambers

the water, and they die. Fish are totally dependent upon water. Like the fish, we are totally dependent upon God for our very existence. Like the water, God surrounds us and is so intimate with us, we might forget to notice.” and then they would have leaned forward to make the point “Everything is bathed in God.”⁷

That is why it stands out for me every year (although it is rarely mentioned) that these wise ones journeyed from foreign lands, which meant foreign faith. “Tragically we have often been given the impression that we have all the light we need, within our nation, within our religious tradition, within our cultural inheritance. But our Gospel story points to something radically different, that there is Light beyond our inherited boundaries, and that we need this Light, that it is given to complete the Light we have received, not to compete with the Light *but to enhance it*. We need one another as nations and religions as much as the species of the Earth need one another to be whole.”⁸

But this story and journey we talk about today means absolutely nothing if we are not willing to go on the journey with them. If we let others take the journey because they have the time or are more qualified, or perhaps we think they need it more. If we sit back and want to encounter this presence by just listening to words we will not be changed, we will not notice that in which we live and move and have our being.

If we just let the magi take this journey it becomes nothing more than a cute little story with figurines that we put up every December. We will not know what brought the magi to the child if we do not consider what brings us towards sacred and holy times and places. We will not know unless we choose to believe and journey in hope.

We will not know unless we begin to wonder what brings us closer to who we are created to be. We will not know what brought them to the child unless we know what brings us to choose to live courageously when we find our own star beckoning.

If we set our eyes on the light of hope the journey of the wise men will become our story and we will see what they saw, we may even begin to kneel before the miracle of each new day and we may begin to choose to offer gifts out of the amazing gifts of ourselves and we will begin to live knowing everything is bathed in God.

⁷ Chambers

⁸ Newell

So let us be encouraged in this New Year - with an amazing faith and hope-filled journey ahead to “commit ourselves to seeking out where Christ may be found, even if it’s inconvenient (like the Magi’s long and dangerous journey). Even if it disturbs the status quo (like the Magi’s visit to Herod). Even if it is costly (like the offering of gifts). Let us be open to the encounter with Christ who will change our direction (just as the Magi went home another way -because they could no longer live in the dark). Let us be encourage to live into the light - to believe and live and journey in hope.