

St. James UCC Havertown, PA

January 6, 2019 | Epiphany

Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | “The Wisdom in Obedience”

Good Morning. Let me first begin by saying “Happy New Year, St. James!” This is such a special day! It’s my first Sunday with you while Pastor Lynn is on sabbatical; it’s the first Sunday of 2019; it’s a Communion Sunday; and it’s Epiphany Sunday! The gospel passage today shares the popular story of the “wise” men following a bright star to where the Baby Jesus was in Bethlehem. It tells the story of the Epiphany of Jesus Christ. A simple definition of Epiphany is “to show or to reveal or to make manifest” and so, when we are talking about *epiphany* in relation to the Church, we are talking about the revelation of God to humanity that Jesus is the Son of God, that Jesus is God manifested in human flesh. This is one of the tenants of Christianity and truly one of the mysteries of our faith.

So much iconography, and music, and creative arts, in general, have been created from the story of these remarkable men. Some of the art and songs are close depictions of what is written in the biblical text and others are not. Religious traditions and rituals have been created out of this story that are carried out all over the Christian world. As a matter of fact, Epiphany has been celebrated globally by Christians for many years long before Christmas gained popularity. Our siblings in the faith from various Christian Orthodox traditions celebrate Epiphany on January 6, instead of celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25.

There is much biblical scholarship around who were these men? Were they magicians or sorcerers? Were they experts in astrology and divination or were they scientists of astronomy? How many men were there? What country or countries did they come from? Were they of different races or nationalities? Do we know their names? We see three men in most depictions of the Epiphany but Matthew’s text does not indicate a number. And if you look at the cover photo on your program today, you’ll see three figures in the picture. I couldn’t find a “free” picture with a copyright license for church program use with more than three men in it. In other words, every picture I found was of three men. Perhaps artists and song writers have decided that there were three men because of the three gifts that were presented to the Jesus child.

We can speculate for days about many things regarding the men that followed the star to worship Jesus as a baby but what we do know for certain is that they were obedient to God. You can read chapters upon chapters in bible commentaries and journals about whether they were actually Jews; or whether they were Gentiles; or whether they were astrologers and diviners; or whether they were pagans or holy men of a priestly and

highly educated class. The truth of the matter is that Matthew provides us with very few personal details about them and the rest is up to speculation and historical context.

I'm sure you all have your own opinions on the matter. This is a very popular story and we've been shaped by hundreds of years of art and song surrounding them. Can I share with you what I believe?? I believe that these men were highly trained in astrology, astronomy, and divination and that they served as advisers to a king or queen from the Persian region. The word *magus* (may-gus) originates from an ancient Persian word that refers to a person from a priestly class of people. Because of the training of these *magi* (may-jiy), and aspects of their work that related to advising Persian royalty, over time this word became linked with the term, sorcerer. The Hebrew Bible provides us with stories of magi or wise men from Persia (with the prophet Daniel being elevated to head the magi and the book of Esther describing the Persian King Xerxes' trusted advisors as magi) and Joseph being elevated to oversee the Egyptian advisors and wise men who served Pharaoh. I believe these magi from today's Gospel reading were walking in the wisdom of Godly obedience.

Somebody might be thinking...Doesn't God have harsh words against those who practice astrology and divination in the Old Testament?? Yes, God does speak strongly against those who engage in these things and yet...God also knows the hearts of all people. I believe that God can use anyone, especially anyone who is willing to be used of God. It doesn't matter who you are; what you've done; where you come from; where you live...none of that matters to God. If you have a heart to worship God; if you have a heart to serve God; God can use you just as you are, right where you are. Again, I believe these men were walking in the wisdom of obedience to God.

This is what I find so amazing about the Epiphany story. Here are men -- foreigners from another land -- outsiders, strangers, Gentiles -- who are within the context of the story, identified and likely seen as people who engaged in things prohibited by God by virtue of their professional identity -- and yet, they know about the prophecy of the new born King of the Jews and they leave their homeland to find him so that they can witness this miracle for themselves and worship him!!!

That is amazing to me!!! Think about the resources it took for them to go on this journey; did they have families; what did they have to leave behind to take this journey; how long did they travel; the danger they faced travelling with chests full of treasures of gold, frankincense, and myrrh; the danger they faced in Jerusalem to ask for the whereabouts of the child born as King of the Jews when there was already a person seated in Jerusalem as King -- and that would be Herod??

Can you imagine that?? We know that God was with them in this journey because once they find Baby Jesus at his home in Bethlehem, they receive a dream from God to not return to Herod and they go back home another way.

Sometimes, God doesn't show you how much danger you're in until after the immediate threat has passed. If we really knew the danger we might be in, in that moment, we wouldn't go or do what we're doing sometimes. But because of God's protection and because we are limited in our knowledge of what is going on around us, we sometimes don't know the danger we might be in. When God sends us on a mission, we are empowered to do things we wouldn't normally do on our own. These men were compelled to go and find Jesus to worship him, face to face, as the King of the Jews.

We know they were from the East but we don't know where in the East or how far East. The text doesn't indicate whether the men knew the true intentions of Herod when Herod secretly called them before him to have a chat about the details of when they saw the star. It also doesn't indicate that they answered Herod when he told them to come back to him once they found the child; but the text does indicate that they were divinely warned not to return to Herod.

Thank God for their wisdom in being obedient to God. They took another route home and didn't go back to tell Herod they had found Jesus. It's not in the text but I believe that God also protected them on their journey home. Had these men not been obedient to God -- had they not taken heed of the dream they had, they would have put Jesus in more danger than he already was and their own lives may have also been taken by Herod. But thanks be to God for these men...and yes...I would say they are *wise* men.

These wise ones may have expected to find the baby Jesus in the palace in Jerusalem, after all, they came from the East looking for a new born king. In their context and time in history, it would be reasonable for them to anticipate finding a new born king in a palace somewhere. But when they finally found him in a home in Bethlehem -- which was a small town filled with people on the margins of society and the working poor -- they did not express disappointment nor did they criticize the humble home they found Jesus in.

The text tells us that they were filled with exceeding joy; that they fell down and worshipped him, and presented him with the finest gifts. This is a reminder for us to be careful if we judge people based on where they live or where they are from. God can be found in the slums of society; in the ghettos of the biggest cities; God can be found in the grimmest of places and hope can live anywhere, despite the surroundings or lack of resources. God alone as the Creator knows what our capacity is and what we can

become and achieve. God alone gives us our divine value and sees us with limitless potential.

These men were wise because they recognized who Jesus was, despite their surroundings, and they worshipped Jesus for who He was, the promised King of the Jews. They didn't care about His modest neighborhood or that He wasn't where they expected Him to be or that He wasn't living in typical royal opulence. They are also wise men because God used their expertise in divination to give them a dream that they would know was from God to not return to Herod and they obeyed what they were told in the dream. They knew the dream was from God and they exercised wisdom and listened to God.

The Luke 2 lectionary reading for the Gospel includes the story about the shepherds who were in their fields at night when the angel of God announced to them that Jesus, the Messiah, was born, and could be found in a manger wrapped in tattered bands of cloth. These Jewish herdsmen quickly went into Bethlehem where the Angel led them and they worshipped Jesus the night He was born in the manger. Today, we are reminded of the Gentile wise ones, men who came from the East -- foreigners in search of the new King of the Jews that they may worship Him. They are the first Gentiles recorded in the synoptic Gospels as being aware that Jesus is the Son of God.

God has made Christ known to both Jew and Gentile in these Gospel passages...first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.

May we have the wisdom of these men to recognize God, where ever we may find God;
May we have the courage to follow the light of Christ, even when it takes us places we aren't expecting to go;
May we always remember to worship God for who God is;
And may we always obey what God instructs us to do.

To God be the Glory for sending God's Son, Jesus the Christ, into our world.