

Sermon 010415 Epiphany
Scripture- Matthew 2: 1-12
Sermon Title- Sharing the Good News

We have reached the feast of the Epiphany. It falls just after the twelve days of Christmas, which means that it falls on January 6. Usually, it is celebrated on the Sunday closest to January 6 so here we are. The Feast of the Epiphany has a long and interesting history. It is a holiday that is older than Christmas. Epiphany has been celebrated longer than Christmas has been celebrated. It is, in the world of Orthodox Christianity to this day, Christmas, in the sense that it is the day of gift giving. Epiphany is such a big deal because it is considered the big AHA moment when people realized that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Epiphany story in Matthew's Gospel is rich with stunning, almost overwhelming images. You have the Magi, or Wise Men, or the Three Kings or whatever you want to call them. The exotic visitors from a far away land compel us. Who were they? Where did they come from? And why? How many Magi were there? The song says three. But Scripture says there were three gifts, not three Magi. What about those extraordinary gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

The story is full of treachery and deceit. Herod hears of the baby born to be a ruler and in a slippery and slimy statement, orders the Magi to, "Go and make a careful search for the child.

As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too, can go and worship him.” (MT 2: 8) The Magi see that Herod is only interested in eliminating a potential rival so they go back by a different route.

The next extraordinary symbol is of course the star. ‘Star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright.’ The star leads the traveler to the manger, a feeding trough, to find the newborn king wrapped in swaddling clothes. Stephan Spielberg could not come up with better images or a more dynamic plot line. But there is all is in the gospel.

For most of us, we are now exhausted with the season. Take the tree down, for goodness sake. Pack it all away and lets move on. Advent, then Christmas, then Christmastide drags on... enough already. When you take away the angels and lovely animals, what are we left with? This. God came into the world in Jesus and we are to share the good news.

Epiphany is the common name for this holiday, but the official name is, The Manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. ‘Gentiles’ means non-Jews. The Magi were gentiles and so are we. The Epiphany is a public event. By bringing the Magi into the story, we see that the Christ is not limited to one group. Christ is for the world, which includes all of us.

Those who experience Christ are to share him with the world. Jesus is the light of the world. The Magi turned a local event into what we today call a worldwide phenomenon. We don't know if the Magi spread the word of the Christ child. I expect some preachers will tell you that they did, but Scripture is silent on the subject. We know that the Magi are our witnesses, witnesses for the gentile world, to the sacred event. We know that many after them, particularly St. Paul, evangelized the good news to gentiles.

Today, it is we who are called to evangelize. You might be shocked to hear that. We don't normally think of ourselves here as evangelicals. In our times, there are three groups that we normally think of as evangelicals. The people who call themselves Evangelicals, the Mormons, and Jehovah Witnesses rather famously evangelize. Normally, we find these groups and their efforts at evangelizing annoying.

There is the story that I may have told you of the man who answered the knock on the front door to find two Jehovah Witnesses. They said, "Jesus Christ is the Lord. It is time you learn that. Do you want to live for eternity blissfully in heaven?" The man said, "Will you two be there?" They said, "Most certainly!" He said, "Well then, I'm not interested." And he slammed the door in their faces.

So when we hear that we are called to evangelism, it is an unsettling notion. But the Epiphany is a call for evangelism. We have a story to tell the world. Jesus is the light of the world. Now, do we do this by going out and knocking on doors? Do we do that by accosting people as they enter the market? I'm willing to accept the notion that those approaches have been tried and don't seem very effective.

We have the good news. It is time to spread it. The gospel can never be shut up. There might be difficulty. Paul had trouble but he kept the gospel alive and so can we.

One thing that Paul was clear about...it was not about Paul; it was about Jesus. It is not about me. It is about Jesus. It is not about Union Church. It is about Jesus. It is not about you. It is about Jesus. If we make it about anything else but God in Jesus, we will fail. We are not sharing ourselves. We are sharing the gospel, the good news.

I remember my ordination in 2007. The person I asked to give the sermon is the most brilliant person I've ever known. His name is The Rev. Dr. Wesley Wildman. Dr. Wildman is the head of the theology department at BUSTH. He gave a wonderful sermon that day and the central theme was this. He told me that my ministry is not about me. It is about the Lord. I remind myself of that message daily.

I may not be a very good preacher or pastor. I may not be clear as crystal in my messages. I surely strive to be good at this work. But one thing I can say with confidence about my ministry... I've never made it about me and I never will. It is about Jesus Christ and it always will be.

How about you? Do you do here what you do so that you will be noticed? Do you wish to impress others here with your efforts, or talents, or gifts? Or for you is it about service to the Lord? If you make it about you, any visitor will not come back again. Always, it is about God. If you make it about God, your discipleship in Christ and what you do is in that service, then it will catch on with others.

Ultimately, here is how to best spread the word. It is for people to see in you and me the truth of Christianity. If we are to be truly Christian, it means that we are more generous, more compassionate, more kindly, and more thoughtful.

You have the gospel to proclaim. Do it by not just what you say, but who you are and how you conduct yourself. If you are an agent of reconciliation, a forgiving person, a giving person, a peaceful person, you are proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was St. Francis of Assisi who said, "Preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary, use words."

The Magi, on Epiphany, represent a world that hungers and thirsts for the good news. They were the first gentiles to get it. We cannot be the last. The world is still hungry and thirsty for the good news. Be the one to spread it, and only when necessary, use words. AMEN