

## *The Trip to Bethlehem*

*Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matthew 2: 1-12*

We started this journey back at the beginning of Advent. A trip to Bethlehem, and it started with a star. A star that led Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and hundreds of thousands of people to a place where Jesus was born. What has been revealed to us on this journey to Bethlehem? What does the star finally reveal? How will we respond?

This story is truly a spiritual journey of transformation. The star is a light in this time of deep darkness and fear. It's a light that symbolizes spirit, and divine intelligence and wisdom, for God is considered the primordial light.

This is Epiphany Sunday, and it's the Sunday where we focus on the star, the light. The word epiphany comes from a Greek term meaning *manifestation* or *showing forth*. God's love is shown to us in Jesus. Jesus is this radiant light of God here on earth that is shining brightly for all of us.

An epiphany is also an important truth which suddenly becomes clear. "There comes some moment when an important truth comes clear and we can reinterpret our past and rethink our way forward into the light of it."<sup>1</sup> So what is revealed to us in this story is that a child, found in a stable, is truly the Messiah. And the Messiah's arrival holds meaning for all people – both present and past. For the magi were foreigners, and it's important to them and it was important to Herod to figure out who this child was. The one that had been prophesied about. Now, both the wise ones and Herod had different reasons for going out and searching for this child. I want to explore the details of the story just a little more:

The Gospel of Matthew – I don't know if you know this – didn't mention any numbers. Most of us have grown up believing that there were three wise ones and three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And yet no numbers were mentioned. These details often overshadow the most important words, I think, in this particular passage, which is *paying him homage*. The wise ones paid him homage. Paying Jesus homage is what give this story purpose and direction. The Greek word for paying him homage was used to describe the most common practice of prostrating oneself at the feet of a king. In this case, they believed him to be the king of the Jews. Prostrating oneself is a physical posture dramatically expressing the idea of giving, not just gifts, but our entire selves – giving our entire selves to Christ. Herod tells the wise ones that once they had

---

<sup>1</sup> Kendra G. Hotz, *Feasting on the Word*; Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 194.

found the Messiah that he too would like to pay homage, yet we know that that was not really Herod's intention. Herod recognized the implications of his birth, and as one theologian put it: "Herod and his consultants – "which were the wise ones – "recognized the implications of the birth the minute they heard what impelled the journey of the magi. If there is a new king who can inspire people to take a strenuous journey to an unknown location so that they can pay him homage, then the magnitude of their efforts suggests that the established powers are at risk of being challenged." So basically, Herod was afraid of the power that this vulnerable child had because of the prophecies and because of what was understood. This did not stop the magi from going. They continued on their way, they followed the star, and when they arrived, they saw Mary and Joseph and the child. They did not give him the gifts at first, but rather they got down on their knees, they paid him homage and they praised him. They prostrated themselves and presented themselves completely to this child. It was only after this act of praising him that they presented him with the gifts.

Now as with the entire story of Christmas, there is a lot of symbolism to be found, and the gifts that they brought are no exception. Gold symbolizes Christ's majesty. That Christ will be king. Frankincense signifies the worship of Jesus' divinity; that divine spirit. And myrrh overshadows the preparation for burial after his premature death. It was by grace that the magi were able to experience unbridled joy. They beheld the substance hoped for and humbled themselves to worship the gift of God. Jesus, and what has been revealed in this story is that Jesus is the promise of salvation for the entire world, and the gift of joy. This is what sent the wise ones home by another path. For once you see the divine revelation, you no longer need to follow the star. Because the external power of the star now goes inward. Once they saw the child, they had been enflamed. Their hearts grew. Their hearts were so inflamed because of the divine revelation and their memory was illumined because they would never forget what they saw. The magi left with their hearts full in an illumined memory. They had been changed in that moment. They had trusted the signs. Once they were witnesses of this miraculous moment, the gift of God, everything changed. Metaphorically speaking, they really couldn't go back on road that they came down on. Their lives now were different, so they took a different path; one that protected this child, and one that led not towards Herod, but away.

This story invites us to also embark on our journey as disciples, and we need to discern the direction that is offered before us. A direction that will lead us to healing and new hope. Epiphany Sunday really is our opportunity to reaffirm our direction as individuals and as a faith community. This is the journey to the light of acceptance, reconciliation, and healing. The story of this journey to see the baby Jesus reveals that even in his infancy, Jesus Christ is for *all* humanity. Not only for the chosen few. Jesus is bringing all people together, far and wide. If you think about it, the wise ones were foreigners, strangers to Mary and Joseph, yet they came. The shepherds were also strangers to Mary and Joseph, and they came too. So what does this say about God, and what does that call us to do? Now I'm not one that likes the traditional New Year's Resolutions. However, I am interested in this time of year on Epiphany Sunday in making

a new commitment to our faith journey. Our faith journey is lifelong. It didn't end with baptism. It didn't end with my confirmation, and it didn't end with my ordination. It continues on to eternal life. That means that I need to remember and take time to see God's love, God's divine light shining in each and every one of you throughout this entire world.

So what is God calling you to be about in this point on your faith journey? What questions are you holding in your hearts? What direction is the light drawing you? How is God calling you to share the good news with others?

The prophet Isaiah today presents us with a challenge: to stop standing idly by and instead answer the call. He says: "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of God has risen upon you." We need to have faith. We need to trust in God. And we have a responsibility to not only receive this light, but also to respond to it.

The word for last year, I think we can all agree. was *pivot*. We continually pivoted. I wonder what the word will be for this year. Will we hold onto God's promise: "Behold, I make all things new." Can you imagine if that was our word for this year? Behold, for God makes all things new. What will become of all of us? Will we find the strength, as the wise ones did, to keep moving forward? Will we find that we will be there for each other, no matter what? No matter if we are friends or strangers. Will we find a way to continue to serve one another, not out of the desire for personal gain but from a place of compassion and goodwill for all.

Friends, it may feel as though we are going back in time, back to where we started a couple years ago, but we are not. We have learned, we have grown, and we have appreciated what we do have.

I found a reflection by one of my favourite writers, Henri Nouwen, really helpful in reframing this time that we're in. It's a reflection that provides us with understanding behind what compelled the wise ones to do what they did. And it's entitled "Enough Light for the Next Step." It says:

"Often, we want to be able to see into the future. We say, 'How will next year be for me? Where will I be in five or ten years from now?' There are no answers to these questions. Mostly, we have just enough light to see the next step: what we have to do in the coming hour or the following day. The art of living is to enjoy what we notice and not complain about what remains in the dark. When we are able to take that next step with trust that we will have enough light for the steps that follow, we can walk through life with joy and be surprised at how far we will go. Let's rejoice in the little light we carry, and not ask for the great beam that would take away all shadows."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey; A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), January 8 reflection.

Know that your light is with you. Jesus came to give us that light, and we have received it. And so now go out into the world and share that light with others.