

“Following the Light”

Matthew 2:1-12

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I had an epiphany about this sermon - pun intended. While I was reflecting on the text for this morning, I realized that the journey of the Magi from discovering the rising star, traveling to Herod, following the star again, stopping where the star stopped at the place where Christ was born, and leaving by another road is a metaphor for the inner, spiritual journey. In a very real way, this story of the Magi mirrors the story of our awakening to God's presence with us. The story of the Magi's journey is a guideline of a treasure map, so to speak - for us to follow as we seek to know God's light and love more clearly.

In his sermon for this morning that was recorded for Day 1 Radio, John Philip Newell explains that the word "epiphany" simply means "showing" or "shining forth."¹ He goes on to explain that the divine light shines forth from the Christ Child. It is not a foreign light, but the light that is at the heart of all life or a light from which all things come. This light of God is the light at the heart of everything: the light at the heart of you, the light at the heart of me.²

The spiritual journey that the Magi take, and the spiritual journey that all of us take, is that of following and looking for the light of God in our lives and in the world. We begin, like the Magi, by discovering the light or by seeing it and noticing it. For the Magi, this light is named as a star rising in the east. For the inner spiritual journey, this light is often named as the moment when we discover that we're not alone on the journey of life. Rather, God is with us. This is often a profound discovery. It is usually life altering and powerful enough for us to want to understand it more fully.

I remember this moment of discovery in my own life. I was a freshman in college and majoring in Religious Studies. While I'd always been interested in God and the story of faith, I discovered that the study of religion was difficult and often challenged my childhood ideas about God. By the end of my first semester in college, I seriously doubted whether God existed. At the beginning of my second semester, a friend invited me to go on a retreat in the mountains of New Hampshire. On the first night, I couldn't sleep, so I bundled up and went outside. It was a clear, very cold, January night. The sky was filled with brilliant stars that seemed quite close. For some reason, I decided to have a conversation with God. I remember saying something like: "if you're there, let me know." And, as I stood there under the canopy of stars, I knew at the core of my being that God was real. I was not alone. I was filled with a sense of peace and calming light. For me, it was a true moment of Epiphany.

¹ Newell, John Philip. Sermon. January 6, 2013. Day1.org.

² ditto

This discovery of the God's presence with us often fills us with a yearning to know more about God. Once the Magi saw and recognized the significance of the star, they sought guidance and understanding. They went to Jerusalem to visit Herod in order to figure out where Jesus was born.

We do this in a similar way when we turn to the church, higher education, spiritual books, or spiritual teachers to discover more about the meaning of God's light with us.

One of my favorite teachers is Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast. Many have heard me talk about his website, www.gratefulness.org. Speaking with a gentle, soft voice, Brother David encourages all believers to seek God's light through the practice of gratefulness. Regardless of how hard our lives are, Brother David teaches that gratitude is at the center of spiritual knowing. When we give thanks for the gift of life ó for the new day ó for the food we eat and the air we breathe, our lives are gradually transformed and we become light and love in the world. ***By practicing gratitude our hearts are transformed from our self-oriented neediness to God-oriented caring.*** In Friday morning's word for the day, Brother David writes: "The greatest gift one can give is thanksgiving. In giving gifts, we give what we can spare, but in giving thanks we give ourselves." His teaching has been transformative for me and for others.

Looking for guidance on the spiritual journey is not a single event, but a journey of discovery that happens again and again. As we keep seeking God, God keeps seeking us. For the Magi, once they listened to the advice given to them in Jerusalem, they set out to follow it. In a wonderful moment in scripture, our text tells us that as they set out to Bethlehem, the star in the east showed up again and continued to guide the Magi until they found the Christ child.

Like the Magi, when we follow the guidance given to us by our faith, our understanding of God's light deepens. We come to see and understand God more clearly.

Once, when I was questioning whether or not some guidance given to me was of God, a very wise woman said: "You'll know it's truth by its fruits." What she meant is that a teaching that is God-oriented will manifest itself in God-like qualities, such as, love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. A teaching that is not God-oriented will manifest itself in qualities such as, hatred, anger, fear and despair. St. Paul speaks of this when he talks about the fruits of the Holy Spirit. It is a helpful thing to remember as we discern how God's light is dwelling with us.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this whole Epiphany story is when the Magi leave the Christ child and travel on a different road. They do not return to Herod. They listen and trust a dream and go home a different way.

This happens on the spiritual journey as well. As our knowing of God increases, we find ourselves traveling on a different, spirit-centered road. As people of faith, God invites us to be peaceful, not angry. God asks us to be loving, not spiteful. God's light

invites us to embrace oneness, not superiority. Choosing this way of God means choosing a different road.

Dewitt Jones beautifully explains this concept in his movie: *What's Right with the World*. (We have it in the library). In the early part of his life, Dewitt was a photographer for *National Geographic*. He made his living by taking beautiful, award-winning photos. Working for National Geographic gave him the opportunity to travel the world, and he began to see, through his camera lens, the glory of creation, even when things weren't perfect for a photo shoot. In fact, he discovered that if he trusted enough, beauty and light would guide him to fantastic photos. In a beautiful moment in the movie, he explains his initial disappointment at arriving to photograph a field of dandelions and discovering they had all turned to puffballs. After a moment, he decided not to be disappointed, but to look again at what was before him. He decided to photograph the puffballs. For one photo, he ended up lying on his stomach and taking a picture of the underside of a puffball. The sun glistens through the white fluff and the result is a spectacular picture of something most of us would never see. At the end of the movie, Dewitt simply states that rather than being the best in the world, we are invited to be the best for the world. We are invited to travel on a different road and listen for God's revelation to teach us and guide us.

The Magi knew this. They trusted God's light and followed. They went on the journey to discover the Holy One made manifest. It is my hope and prayer that we, too, can trust in God's light-with-us.

May God be with us on the journey. Amen.

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