

January 5

Epiphany

We Have Come to Honor Him

Matthew 2:1-12

I want you to put yourself in the place of the wise men. What must have been their thoughts, their hopes, their fears as they began this incredible journey? As they ended it? They had, no doubt, risked their fortunes and their reputations to travel far --- only to have their purposes nearly thwarted and their lives threatened by a paranoid ruler. They had traveled to see royalty and they were led to kneel before a baby born of poor parents in an out of the way place. They must have had both dreams and nightmares about this particular journey for the rest of their lives as they wondered at its meaning for them and for all the world.

Thinking of those wise men I find myself wondering about what stirred in their hearts to compel them to risk so much. What deep yearning for something other than what they had known led them to travel so far? And as I think of them I find myself thinking of all of us and wondering at other journeys taken...and what it is that makes such journeys possible, necessary, preferable, even, to simply living the life that is right before us. What sign in the sky, what communication from God, would make me go that deep, that far to discover its meaning for me?

For me, the wise men tell us to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open for those times when we are called to step out in faith. Those times will come to us all, that's guaranteed. And when they do, it is also a sure thing that we will encounter God, perhaps in unexpected ways and places, too. And it is also certain that our lives will never be the same again. Let us look at the Magi's journey a little more in depth and see how this works for us.

It strikes me that those travelers to Bethlehem were simply living their lives to their natural conclusions. For apparently their life's work was studying the stars. And when they saw a star which seemed to hold such meaning, all they could do, if they were to be true to who they were called to be, was to follow its direction. This tells me that we are called first of all to live as fully as we can the life God has given us without

apology or pretext. Think about the nativity and those who came; shepherds in fields being told by angels to go and see; wise men who studied the stars following a star. It isn't about a carpenter who all of a sudden sees a star and follows it. In fact, we are told that most missed the sign. Those in Jerusalem who might have been expected to see it and know it, didn't see it. Even when it was pointed out to them, they sent the wise men to Bethlehem. They were too busy. Being fully open to God in the moment you are in is part of what we hear. When you do that you will find you encounter God, sometimes in very unexpected ways.

Again, think about those travelers. Having studied the stars and having felt the prodding of one particular star to take this incredible journey they first, as was logical, went to Jerusalem where King Herod resided. If you are looking for a king you start by going to the palace. But they were sent on and when they came to the place to which the star led them, they were met there by God. We know this could not have been at all what they expected. Arriving at a humble home of a tradesman would have caused them to pause. Such a child's birth is not signaled in the heavens. Yet this one's birth they had seen in the stars. They moved beyond doubt to belief and because of this they encountered not the king they expected but God in the form of a baby or young child. Against all odds they believed that "Holy One," God's Own Son was present in these humble surroundings and offered their gifts.

This challenges us to look for God in the midst of our lives. It might be in unexpected places and ways and instead of rejecting the idea or arguing that this could not be, to believe. I know I have often encountered God in my duties of being a pastor. Having a small child come up to you after church and give you a hug just because you are their pastor is such an encounter. Visiting with people who are struggling to make ends meet, to keep life together, yet having such a dignity about them is such a glimpse. The word epiphany means manifestation. This season is about the light of God come into the world. We will see it if we set aside our preconceptions.

This is what the travelers did and yet, at the same time what happened was probably more than what they bargained for when they first started out. We do not know exactly what prompted them to leave their studies to follow the star, for packing up to

travel to far flung places was probably not in the job descriptions they first accepted. In going they were, I am sure, thinking they would see a king, who would receive their tribute and likely they would receive something in return. For that is how things worked in those days. In the end they learned to trust and believe, not from the rational side of the brain, the side they would mostly have used in their work, but from the emotional side, the heart. The journey had taken them from sitting in a quiet, familiar place, taking notes on parchment and sharing their insights with others to a time of exploration. I imagine the rest of their days were forever changed. As they reflected on what they saw and experienced they were probably puzzled as well as gratified by what had happened. They would have returned definitely changed.

Perhaps this is so for all of us. As we use and develop the gifts that God has planted within us... as we become all we were made to be, with eyes and hearts open, we, too, will encounter God. And yet, there must be a point, it seems when we follow God's leading out of our most comfortable places in order that we might encounter the Holy One as well. And it could be that it might not look like we thought it would, but in the surprise itself, perhaps God resides.

In closing let me share a story of another traveler. You may have heard it before. Joe had been out of work for a while. He had just gotten a new job but money was tight. There was now a baby coming but he wondered how they were going to pay the rent and utilities this month. The future looked bright but the next few weeks were going to be a challenge. He was driving home in his beat up old truck. It was winter and there had been a bit of snow that day. It was almost dark and he was thinking of how good it would be to get home and start dinner for his wife who was working late. He noticed an expensive car by the side of the road with its blinkers going with an older woman sitting at the wheel. She had a flat tire. Joe almost drove by because he assumed that she would have called the auto club. It wasn't his problem. Yet, his mother had taught him better than that. So Joe pulled his old truck to the side and got out. He noticed a look of fear on the woman and realized that he might look threatening. Joe was big and muscular, had a full beard and was wearing a ragged coat. He smiled and when she rolled down the window just a crack he asked her if she needed help. She wondered if he would go and call and get someone to come and change her flat. It was now almost

dark and cold. He was worried about her and told her he would do it. He told her to stay in the car. She popped the trunk and he muscled the spare tire out, got down in the snow to place the jack, and then hoisted the car, changed the tire and put the flat tire back in the trunk. When he finished she rolled down the window a little further and asked him how much she owed him. Joe could really use extra money but he again remembered what his mother had taught him. So he said, "You don't owe me anything. I was taught to help strangers in trouble. When you have a chance, pass the blessing along." Cold and dirty Joe got in his truck and saw the lady drive away.

The lady drove down the road to a diner. She was hungry and so decided to stop for a bite. The waitress was a young woman who was in her last stages of pregnancy. You could tell that her feet and back hurt yet she was kind and considerate of the woman and gave her exceptional service. The lady was at the cash register to pay. The waitress was called away to take another person their dinner. She said, "I'll be right back." The lady realized this was her chance. Reaching into her purse she got out two one hundred dollar bills and said as she left, "Keep the change." A little later that night the waitress came home and hugged her husband. She said, "We aren't going to have to worry about the rent. Everything is going to be o.k. Joe."

Joe was just doing what he had been taught to do. He saw a chance to do good. He was a blessing and this lady saw a glimpse of God in the most unexpected form and rose to the challenge to pass on the blessing to others. In this case the circle was complete but even if it hadn't been, it is a reminder to be faithful on your journey, looking for God and seeing how we and others can be a blessing and be blessed as Mary and Joseph were blessed so long ago. I also believe the wise men were blessed in their brief encounter with Jesus, a blessing they would have held all their days.