

## THE HOUSE OF EPIPHANY

MATTHEW 2:1-12

*Text of sermon delivered by the Rev. Canon Carolyn Coleman on Sunday, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2009 at the Cathedral Church of Saint Luke in Portland, Maine*

Joe and I have two amazing girls. When it comes to traveling, I would even venture to say that we have the best children on the planet. Let me qualify this a bit or else you'll just think I'm bragging. Over the holidays, my family traveled to North Carolina by car. That's a 1600 mile drive round trip. Except for the occasional requests for snacks, not a peep out of our two young girls. They are good travelers, and we thanked them profusely about every 200 hundred miles.

On our way down, we had to stop for the night just below White Plains, NY. We found the Best Western had the cheapest rates for that area and so we pulled in. It was a sad little hotel all dressed up for Christmas. The lobby and restaurant were weighted down with plastic garlands and oversized decorations on an artificial tree. A server and the cook were watching TV in the small restaurant next to the lobby that had a fluorescent bulb flickering off and on. It took me 10 minutes to hail the hotel manager so that we could check in and get to bed.

In that time, Ava, our oldest, walked around the lobby. Her eyes were like saucers as she surveyed all of the tacky Christmas trimmings, and touched the plastic ferns and picked up fake oranges in a small lounge area made up to look welcoming. Then she came to me and said in a small, quiet voice, which is a challenge for her, especially when Iris is trying to sleep, she said, "This is a very fancy hotel. It is so beautiful here, I wish we could stay forever." I confess I laughed a bit as I gave her a hug such cuteness deserved.

But then the following day, sitting in the car for hours, I realized how wise our five year old was: the Best Western at exit 11a was indeed a fancy place. It provided a clean and safe bed on which to lay our heads, and it gave us a free breakfast in the morning. It would be the place we would journey toward on our way back. We were lucky to have the resources to stop at such a fancy hotel on our journey to see family over the holidays.

1600 miles provides ample opportunity to think about the wise men traveling under much more difficult conditions. Chances are, they slept on a bed of sand instead of one in a fancy hotel. The Epiphany story is a curious thing – first of all, it is the only Epiphany story in the four Gospels. Only Matthew tells the story about the wise men and the star. Only Matthew writes about the threats and horrific deeds of King Herod. Only Matthew hints at the profound meaning of this birth in this insignificant town of Bethlehem.

Subsequently, we don't know much about the wise men – we don't even know if there were three of them, only that they bore three gifts. What's more, they enter a *house*, according to Matthew, not a stable. And what about this star? Luke doesn't write

about it, and neither do Mark or John. Heck, Mark and John don't even tell the story of Jesus' birth.

But these wise men *are* compelling aren't they? If we take what Matthew says at face value, we know they are from the East. Presumably, then, they are not Jewish, and Matthew would have mentioned it if they were Roman. Yet, they know about the words of the prophet Micah and they know how to read the stars. They use their understanding of astronomy to embark on this perilous journey from the East in order to greet a new king. Mind you, they have no obligation to this new king.

Maybe you are with me in thinking that this kind of endeavor makes them far from wise. After all, men traveling with precious goods like they were put themselves at risk of robbers. The scorching desert sun during the day and the below freezing temperatures at night certainly would have made the journey challenging. And how far out of the East did they come? Was it neighboring Syria or did they follow the spice roads all the way from China? Then there is the matter of entering the territory of the Roman Empire as a stranger. The violence with which the Romans treated non-citizens had to have been infamous at the time. Are we to think of them as courageous as well as wise?

This is the question then, isn't it: What makes the wise men wise?

They recognized something extraordinary afoot in the universe. You could say they'd had an epiphany. And when they arrived at the place where the Child was, and cast eyes upon that Child, they must have known they'd made the right decision.

The Child has a role to play here too. In India, the faithful journey to temples in order to do darshan, to literally see the deity. There are long lines of devotees waiting to catch a glimpse of a statue of a Hindu depiction of God. It's not enough, though, to glimpse it across the room. You have to stand in front of it, touch its base or its feet, and then touch your own head. What's happening there is that the devotee is being seen by God as much as God is being seen by the devotee.

What happened in that house with the star overhead I think is a similar thing. The infant Jesus looked at those wise men, and somehow and in some way made himself known as God come to live among us. The wise men recognized this communication and responded with imperfect gifts for this perfect child.

I am grateful to be here this Sunday and even more grateful that you have allowed me to be away for three months on maternity leave. It seems fitting to close with a story. It's a story about Ava as an infant, but you could replace any infant's name with Ava's— Iris, or Garrett or \_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_.

At about three weeks old, Ava took her first plane ride to a memorial service in Nashville, Tennessee. Thankfully, she slept at all altitudes as her parents soaked up the praise from previously skeptical seatmates. I wasn't surprised by the attention she received from everyone who visited us in her first two weeks, but I soon noticed over this weekend that Ava was referred to as Our Baby, and the "our" didn't mean Joe and me. I realized the family had claimed her theirs: she now belonged to the public domain of an aging family who had gathered to celebrate the life of a sweet and gentle woman, her late grandmother who passed exactly a month before she was born. As we

continued to take her out into the world of grocery stores, Bowdoin College students, church and even Jiffy Lube, the sense that Ava was more than “Ava” stuck out underneath the attention she received as a newborn.

This sense helps me understand the Epiphany story in a radically different light. If “all the hopes and fears of all the years are met” in the baby Jesus, don’t all babies remind us of the new beginning the Christ child gives us? Now Iris and every other baby belong to the general domain because they too incarnate hope; babies belong to the world because they are 100% potential. They are full of so many dreams – their own and ours – and have no regrets, and that freshness wears off on us. I think of the hope and faith for a new world that the wise men so long ago put into that little person we call Jesus when I see people fawn over these little things we call Iris and Garrett and \_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_.

A new baby brings the promise of an ongoing life full of new possibilities, new opportunities, new chances, new ways to convince the world that we shouldn’t give up and that anything, if not all things are possible. God has an uncanny way of churning up all our failures, nightmares, disappointments and regrets and resurrecting something beautiful and useful, something we work with and share, if we choose to accept that journey. I think when we hold new babies, we’re acquiring the wisdom of how sweet it can be to accept God’s working in our lives.

One of the things that strikes me the most, even now that Iris is an old woman of three months, is the one phrase people say over and over, regardless of their age: “Look how small she is,” and often it’s punctuated with, “I forget how small *they* are.” And always, always there is this kind of silence that is electric, like right before a summer thunderstorm; people seem to lose all sense of language. Even Ava in her five years, was stunned to silence as she held Iris for the first time last September. When I stand there and look at a baby, like I’ve done with both Ava and Iris, my nephew and niece, and with Garrett during the Christmas pageant, I get a sense of what the wise men and what Mary and Joseph themselves must have been thinking: “This is our best chance.”

It’s ironic that the wise men are men. Normally children are the domain of women in Scripture. Already we see God turning the world on its head. I believe these dusty, tired, crazy hopeful star followers held the infant Jesus and cooed over him like silly girls. It is these first men who show us how effortless it is to be wise and experience the easiness of God’s presence of among them.

And us? We forget how small hope can be. We make it into something we have to earn or get, something out there. The Epiphany story shows us how simple hope is, and how easily we can believe it’s possible that God is with us in the small, sleeping body of Jesus. What does that belief give us? It gives us a place to start a life lived fully in the knowledge that we are loved and we have the capacity, if not the gift, to love others fully in our lives. Babies remind us of that.

I remember that on that first scary night home from the hospital, Joe and I watched Ava sleep in the co-sleeper my parents sent us. I leaned over to Joe and whispered, “We’re not alone anymore.” And last October, when we brought Iris to

church for the first time, one of you held her as she slept and then told me, “Everything else went away – I could feel her heart beat.”

Our lives are full of perilous journeys to navigate: our economy, our relationships, our jobs, our sad places no one knows about. At this moment in my life, balancing a two child family with a vocation I love is a stressful and unnerving journey until I remember this starting place – this house of the Epiphany. And it is a fancy house. Here God reminds me, God reminds us, that we are not alone anymore. God is connected to us as surely as each one of our hearts is beating. God holds each us as a beloved newborn and gazes upon us with delight. Our heart is the house of the Epiphany. Here we have only to gaze upon God’s presence and be known to it. Here, in our hearts, God’s presence is always waiting to be recognized. Will you take the journey to find it?