

Date: January 3, 2021

Scripture: Ephesians 3:1-12. Matthew 2:1-12

Preacher: Rev. Robert Dean

Today we are gathered at the celebration of Epiphany. We gather to celebrate the arrival of the Wise Men portrayed as scholars and rulers in our cultural tradition. Bearing gold, the Wise Men offer a gift worthy of royalty. Carrying frankincense, the scholars offer an aromatic spice often used in worship in the temples of Christ's day. Bringing the burial spice myrrh, the Wise Men foreshadow the role that death itself will play in Christ's life. We gather to celebrate the arrival of these three figures in the Christmas narrative.

Epiphany, which is officially January 6th, is considered the traditional end of the Christmas season. The final exchange of gifts and Christ's birthday celebration ends. The journey jumps in time as childhood narratives are nearly absent from the Gospels, and the story of Christ's adult ministry is integral to the purposes of the gospels.

So if the adult stories of Christ's life are so important, why are we stopping here on the journey today? Is the foreshadowing of the gifts and brought by the Wiseman that important? Why aren't we just jumping along in the story? I would say the reason why we do not skip along can be found in the name of the celebration.

There are three common definitions of epiphany and Merriam Webster's dictionary:¹

1. capitalized : January 6 observed as a church festival in commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles or in the Eastern Church in commemoration of the baptism of Christ
2. an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being
3.
 - a.
 - i. a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something
 - ii. an intuitive grasp of reality through something (such as an event) usually simple and striking
 - iii. an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure
 - b. a revealing scene or moment

The first definition is interesting in that it shows that the church as a whole does not agree on exactly what we're celebrating today the eastern church celebrates one thing while the western church celebrates another. If we were in an Orthodox congregation we might be celebrating Jesus's baptism today, but here in a western congregation, we celebrate the coming of the Wise Men. Both branches of Christianity are celebrating Epiphany, but each has their own tradition. It might be said that each has its own revelation to lift up today.

Here in the western church, we are celebrating these three Gentiles acknowledging Christ and Epiphany. God has manifested in the world and the Gentiles have seen it. I believe that looking at the

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany>

very nature of epiphany gives us insight, especially asking what the sudden realization of truth might mean.

There are multiple moments where epiphany has shown itself throughout history. By epiphany I mean epiphany as a life-changing revelation. One example took place nearly 3 centuries before Christ time when a mathematician named Archimedes was pondering how to test the composition of a golden crown. According to legend, he stumbled upon the realization that the same amount of gold would displace less water than a crown made of diluted metals, because a Gold crown diluted with silver would require more volume to weigh the same. Upon realizing this, Archimedes jumped up from the bathtub, and ran through the city of Syracuse screaming “Eureka” without dressing first.

Thousands of years later, the story is often considered suspect. More than likely, the story is an embellishment of actual events. What is not embellished is the fact that Archimedes discovery was one of several that changed the future of physics. While the story itself may be blown out of exaggeration, the truth behind the story is that Archimedes revolutionized the physics of his day.

A similar story set much closer in time to us is the story of a young Isaac Newton sitting Beneath an apple tree. Well there is evidence that Newton was inspired by a falling apple, there is very little evidence that he was actually struck by an apple. Regardless of the truth of whether or not an apple struck Newton, the very story itself captures our imagination. The way that Newton revolutionized physics is emphasized by the story. Although millions of apples may fall each year, The story of this one apple captures the imagination of all who hear the story and emphasize the importance of what Newton had learned.

These eureka moments are great moments of epiphany. Newton and Archimedes’ tales emphasize, highlight, and teach as much as they entertain. The stories tell us as much about what these two scientists learned as they do about the scientists’ lives. What if the same is true of our three wise men? What if the point is not actually about the three gifts or the identity of the three Magi? What if the revelation is at the heart of Epiphany?

Consider for a moment what Paul writes to the Ephesians. Paul is writing to a church that has come to know Jesus as Lord, Messiah, and hope. According to Paul, Christ Jesus is the very one who shares with them promise and grace.

For we who have lived centuries after the events in the years prior to Paul’s ministry, it can seem like ancient history to think of a time when the promise of God did not extend to the Gentiles. Paul is writing to people who have just received the great gift of inclusion in a mystery. What is this mystery? All are created by God and all have a place in God’s love. This mystery has been hidden in plain sight according to Paul. The people receiving this letter are receiving great news. The people that Paul is in jail to reach are receiving great news. The Gentiles that receive these words today are receiving great news, but if we’re not careful then we look right beyond the gift in front of us.

One of the most amazing things about Epiphany is that it is about more than the gifts brought by the magi. The magi know that Jesus has come into the world. The magi know that there is more going on than appears on the surface. The magi even appear to know more than the religious leaders in the area who seemingly should have known first.

Epiphany is amazing in part because it reveals that the light was not only in the world on Christmas, but it was seen beyond the limits of the Jewish people from the very beginning. From the first moments of life, grace began to pour out in amazing and extravagant ways.

I believe that Epiphany has importance today because those same words of grace are still needed. For the people of Ephesus, the good word that God's love included them changed their world. They weren't alone. For centuries upon centuries, we have shared the words they received from Paul because they believed and shared the mystery of God's revelation by passing along their letter.

As the words of God's amazing love and inclusion spread, hope blossomed in far off tribes and lands. Whether in Celtic villages or in Roman churches, the inclusive love spread. Whether in African communities or Asian missions, the word about God's love reached out to people well beyond the world the Apostles knew. No matter the color of a person's skin or the language on their tongue, the message that God's Grace was open to all continued to spread.

Closer to our theological home, a somewhat peculiar set of brothers in the English city of Oxford found themselves confronted by God's inclusive love and began to share the good news everywhere from prisons to fields to street corners. The news brought hope to countless individuals, founded denominations, and inspired reformation and renewal in their church. Prisoners, farmers, and factory workers found their lives improved by God's amazing love.

Do you see why Epiphany might matter to us still? Do you know anyone who has been shoved down and told that their life doesn't matter? They do matter! Do you know anyone who feels dejected and lost? There is hope for both them and us!

How do we know this? God's love for people was so great that it reached out long before Christ even spoke. God's love for people out on the edges was so great that it stretched far beyond the limits of Bethlehem's fields, the people in the temple, and even beyond Israel itself.

God's love is still fresh and available today.