

What's Epiphany Sunday All About?

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson

Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA

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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Wise men, or, more accurately, Magi, set out on a long journey that led them eventually to Jesus.

Matthew doesn't tell us how many magi, or from where they came, and he doesn't call them *kings* but *Magi*.

Magi were practitioners of eastern magical arts. They lived long before the divorce of science and religion that accelerated after the *Enlightenment*. Magi investigated hidden meanings and sought to harness nature's invisible powers. They were explorers of the mind and imagination as well as the material universe. They searched the *heavens above* for answers to questions that the *world below* could not provide. And so when they observed a new star (or perhaps a new configuration of planets) they began a journey that led them eventually to Jesus. When they found him, they worshipped him and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The magi represent the hunger all people have for God. All of us are magi. We're on a journey -- in search of the Eternal One who has *appeared* to us in the birth of the baby Jesus. Epiphany comes from a Greek word meaning "appearance". The *appearance* of a star led magi to Jesus. The glory of the Lord, prophesied by Isaiah, has *appeared* in the birth of Jesus Christ. The mystery of who God is has *appeared*, in Jesus Christ, Paul tells us. My guess is that nobody came to church this morning because you had a burning desire to know *what Epiphany Sunday is all about?* But I'm betting that you're here because you have a desire to find Christ *even if you don't realize he's the source and destination of your journey.*

The journey of the magi reminds us of the instinct or hunger God has created in us for God -- a hunger that led the magi to *traverse afar... Following yonder star*. We all have a hunger for God. Saint Augustine had it right when he said "God has made us for God's Self and we're restless until we find our rest in God". In our heart of hearts there's nothing we want to do more than find and worship God. God is the source and destination of all our desires. God is the source of all truth, love, and virtue. The earthiest pleasures we enjoy in this life find their source and fulfillment in the Eternal One who has come to us in Jesus Christ. We *all* have a hunger for God in Christ and, yet, often people search for God in the wrong places.

Jesuit priest, Walter Burghardt, tells the story of a king of northern Afghanistan named Ebrahim ibn Adam. Ebrahim was wealthy according to every earthly measure. At the same time, however, he sincerely and restlessly strove to be wealthy spiritually as well. "One night the king was roused from sleep by a stumping on the roof above his bed. Alarmed, he shouted: 'Who's there?' 'A friend,' came the reply from the roof. 'I've lost my camel.' Perturbed by such stupidity, Ebrahim screamed: 'You fool! Are you looking for a camel on the roof?' 'You fool!' the voice from the roof answered, 'Are you looking for God in silk clothing, and lying on a golden bed?' " The story goes on to tell how these simple words filled the king with such terror that he arose from his sleep to begin a life long search for God in self sacrificial living. The camel on the roof raises the Epiphany question, Where are you looking for God? More and more people are trying to find God by climbing the ladders of success and power and respectability. The pursuit of money and power has always been one of the most powerful and popular religions. But none of these gods can really satisfy our God hunger.

Our hunger for God is like the migratory instinct. Last week I came across an article about the migratory habits of some birds and butterflies. Somehow, young birds can unerringly fly from summer nesting grounds toward wintering ranges *they've never seen* - and then fly back again the next year. Monarch butterflies perform an even more amazing feat. The butterflies that return to their wintering grounds in Mexico are actually the grandchildren of those that left the previous spring. It takes three generations for the insects to complete the trip. Somehow the butterflies know where their true home is even though they've never been there. Scientists believe that part of the answer is found in the stars. These migrating animals, like the magi, steer by the stars. God has also created us with a God extinct. We find in ourselves a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy. Every pleasure in this life reminds us of the desire only God can satisfy. When we follow that God extinct we are led to the "boundless riches of Christ".

When the magi found Christ they opened their treasure chests and offered him gifts. In our heart of hearts, we all come to church, like the magi, to make an offering. We want our lives to count for something. We want to join with others in giving and serving - in doing something of value for God and the world. The impulse that motivates some to volunteer for Wednesday's Word or to mentor a young person through the Oxford Educational Foundation or deliver meals-on-wheels or be a friend to someone in need through the

Neighborhood Services Center is at work in every human heart – unless, somehow, we manage to stifle it. Writer and preacher, Thomas Long, has said, “Despite the siren song of selfishness and greed that rings through the culture, people still want to give themselves away to a great and holy cause. People come to church for many reasons, but ultimately they come”, like the magi, to find Christ and offer themselves with others in Christ’s service.

I know of a church where the pastor and a few church leaders began approaching non-churched people in the neighborhood and inviting them to church. If the people were musicians, they were asked to play. If they were actors, they were asked to serve as lay readers. If they were dancers, they were asked to dance. The church leaders asked people not simply to come to the service, but to serve, to do something – to pray, to read, to sing, to hand out bulletins, to help prepare and serve communion. The vision gradually began to be shared by the whole congregation and a new spirit of welcome and hospitality pervaded the church. And many, like the magi, found Christ. A church building should not say, “Look at this building; this is the church,” but instead, “Come inside this building and you will find Christ. You will find the fulfillment of your deepest desires through worshiping Christ and offering him whatever gifts we have.

*What can I give Him,
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb,
If I were a Wise Man
I would do my part, -
Yet what I can I give Him,
Give my heart.*

Christina Georgina Rossetti, *'In the bleak mid-winter'*