

Weekend of Sunday, January 6, 2019
Epiphany of Our Lord/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year C
Primary Text: Matthew 2:1-12
Sermon Title: “Arise, Shine; for Your Light has Come”

Theme

God’s promise shines bright in the night as magi follow a star to honor a new king. Strangers from a faraway land, they welcome the long-awaited messiah of Israel.

Text

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Sermon

Isaiah's prophetic ministry served one purpose; to be a human voice for God. And in this prophecy which is our First Reading, Isaiah said on behalf of God, "Nations shall come to your light." In a couple of other places in Isaiah's writings he refers to this same event as "a light to the Gentiles." The light of course is the glory of the Lord, the birth of God's Messiah, Emmanuel, "God with us."

But as I see it there is something that we can learn about God that we can compare to how we live out our lives of discipleship. Let me explain.

"Nations" and "Gentiles" is the way in which the Hebrew people understood everyone but themselves. "Nations" is a funny way of saying people of other nationalities. And the Gentiles are people, really any people, who are not Jews.

So the thing that I want us to learn about the true loving nature of God is that though God chose to work out his divine plan through the Jews, his chosen people, his plan from the beginning was that all people, Jews and Gentiles, would turn to the light, the light being God himself. It was never God's plan that only Jews would be saved. I believe there exists this idea that had the Jews gotten it right, they would have been in and all others would have been out - an erroneous conclusion to what it means to be God's chosen people.

God chose the Jews to be a light to the Gentiles. Although being chosen by God is the highest honor it is not without great sacrifice. Look at the lives of the prophets. It was a burden to be God's chosen. No one wants to hear what God has to say, especially when it's contrary to one's own agenda, or the agenda of one's own nation. So the prophet's life was not a glamorous one that led to many friends and admirers.

But in order for the Jews to fulfill their assignment to be light to the Gentiles, they would have had to realize that they needed to do more outreach in ways that made the godly life look attractive. Let me ask you, have you ever been *approached* by a Jewish evangelist? Have you ever *heard* of a Jewish evangelist? Of course not. Jews don't evangelize. In their way of thinking, why should they, they are God's chosen.

Although there are places in the Gospels where Jesus seems to indicate that he isn't interested in the spiritual well-being of the Gentiles (I'm thinking here of the way he inferred that the Samaritan woman was a dog) I think there are many more places in scripture where Jesus befriended, served, and even lifted up the faith of the Gentiles who came to faith in him through his ministry. And so in both the OT and the NT, I think the only conclusion we can come to is that God, both the Father and the Son, have concern for, and love for all people, regardless of their religious affiliation.

Having learned this about God, how should we change the way we live out our lives of discipleship? I am so glad you asked.

One of the axioms I have developed in my life of discipleship is this: "If it matters to God (Jesus), it ought to matter to us."

If God loves and is concerned for all people, Christians and non-Christians, then who should we be concerned for? For all people, right?

And yet how many times have we pre-judged a person as someone who we think might not fit in here, or thought or even suggested that they would be more comfortable going to another church, or worst of all, thought "I don't think that person could benefit from the Christian life. Just look at the way they dress or the life they live."

As Christians we ought to be "Christ-like" which means to be like Christ, and be more forgiving, more understanding, more charitable, more grace-filled *to all*, even those *and maybe especially to those* whom we judge as unsuitable, un-loveable, undesirable. God is concerned for all and loves all.

In John 3:16 we read, ¹⁶For God so loved *the world* that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

If that is true, then we ought to try to be like God. And God gave the world his human version of himself in the person of Jesus Christ to show the world how to live the godly life.

The gospel story for today is the visitation of the magi. We call it the Epiphany, which literally means *a break-through, a realization, a sudden insight into the*

essential meaning of something. Foreigners, Gentiles, non-Jews saw a sign written in the stars, a divine occurrence that they followed and it led them to this baby that they realized was going have a significant impact on all peoples. They got it! Do we?

On Sunday, December 23, I encouraged all of you to take some time over the next week or so to find your nativity set and take a good look at it and the characters in it and meditate on it. Well, I did that and I had an epiphany of sorts that I would like to share with you. Here is what I was pondering: the Epiphany likely did not happen at the stable in Bethlehem. Scholars say that that event and Herod's slaughter may have happened as late as a couple years after the actual nativity. But that got me thinking about the three "wise men" and then this thought occurred to me; because these wise men were diligent in their seeking the Lord, they found the Lord, and in finding the Lord were instructed to change their way. Yes, perhaps *their way was their way home*, but that sounds like a challenge for us modern seekers of the Lord to consider changing *our ways* as a result of finding the Lord, our ways perhaps being the ways we live out our Christian lives.

So allow me to summarize my own epiphany:

- The magi found what they were looking for because they were seeking it.
- And because they found what they were looking for, they changed their ways.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

And that leads me to my Raisin' the Bar Challenge for this week. I think this passage of scripture is calling us to see ourselves and others, all others, as people loved by God. People, whom even though we can't imagine being the least bit interested in in a life of discipleship, who are never-the-less, people of great concern to God, so much so that he sent his own son to show them the way to living the godly life and ultimately to secure their forgiveness on a cross so that none would be left out of his divine plan.

It could be that they don't even realize they are seeking something that is missing in their lives. We can help them find what we know to be the answer to all seeking, and that of course is Jesus Christ. And once they find him, we know and trust that a life of discipleship will change their ways.

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the promised light that has broken into the darkness is indeed a light for all. A light to draw all others to his divine glow and a light cast into the darkness so that we might be able to see those who, for whatever reason, may not yet fully understand the love and concern of God for them.

Prayer

Everlasting God, the radiance of all faithful people, you brought the nations to the brightness of your rising. Fill the world with your glory, and show yourself to all the world through him who is the true light and the bright morning star, your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen