

Home by Another Road Epiphany – 3 January 2021

For most of us, we understand the word Epiphany to be similar to an “A-ha” moment. And while that definition is correct, in the Biblical context, epiphany means manifestation. It's always puzzled me about the gifts the Wise Ones brought. Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. We'll come back to that.

Herod was a paranoid man. He was the self-confessed King of the Jews. One day, out of the blue, he hears of these wise ones who were traveling to meet the newborn King of the Jews. Herod is confused and dare I say scared. Matthew's gospel tells us, “when King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him”. (Matthew 2.2) King Herod ruled by force and fear. His subjects cooperated, not because of loyalty to him, but out of terror.

Herod hears of these wealthy astronomers who are following a star, searching for the newborn King of the Jews and he knows he needs to find this baby. So he orders an audience with the wise ones. As an aside, we don't actually know how many of them there were. We sing of We Three Kings, but the number is assumed because of the kinds of gifts that were brought. Three kinds.

It was the societal understanding that when you arrived in a new kingdom, if you were a person of importance, you would meet with the King, to express your gratitude and inquire about the kingdom itself. Quite innocently, the wise ones were in Bethlehem as they had been watching the celestial event that happened when Jesus was born. They were asking to speak with Herod to find out where this King of Jews was.

Swallowing his terror in being revealed as one who was not the true King of the Jews, Herod summoned the wise ones and asked why they were in his kingdom. They told him they had been following the celestial event and wanted to pay homage. Homage isn't a word we use often. It means to pay great respect and honour to a living person. For Herod, these words must have struck a chord of terror as he was about to be found out.

Herod ordered a second meeting, for more specific information from the wise ones, and said they were to go and find the child Jesus. They were to then return to Herod, to tell him to the exact location, under the guise that Herod himself would go and pay homage to the rightful King of the Jews.

Have you ever tried to follow a star? I don't mean watching one from inside a home or a vehicle, but actually track and follow a star? It's not very exact, is it?

The wise ones were independently wealthy. They may have been Magi or magicians. They may have been astronomers, but what we do know is they would have been well-educated and quite wealthy. They would have relied on the celestial events to show them significant things. Apparently, on the night of Jesus birth, there was an extraordinary celestial event, wherein a large star rose over the stable where Jesus was born.

Now, understand, that star didn't stay there. Stars are not stationary. We know that from the changing constellations in the night sky. The wise ones had walked a long time, to get to where Herod was, and then they needed to continue walking to where the child Jesus was. Language is very important here. Baby Jesus was born Bethlehem, in what we believe, was a stable. The holy family didn't stay in that stable. Joseph built them a house and they lived there. When the wise ones arrived, they saw the infant Jesus. Not a baby, probably a toddler, less than two years of age.

Now, there are also some assumptions made of Jesus age. The wise ones were warned not to return to Herod, so they returned home by another road. When the wise ones did not return to Herod, he was furious and ordered that all male children under two years of age be killed. This is known as the "Slaughter of the Holy Innocents". Herod was adamant that no baby boy be allowed to claim the rightful title of King of the Jews, so in order to ensure this, he had them all killed.

Joseph was also visited by an angel and warned to take his family to Egypt and remain there until Herod died, as it wouldn't be safe for Jesus to return to Bethlehem or Nazareth during that time.

The wise ones arrived at the house Joseph had built with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We've heard this story; for most of us, all our lives. We've sung the songs about the Three Wise Men or Three Kings. At the end of the day, the number of wise ones is not important. It's the gifts they brought that are of interest.

Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold makes sense. It is a universal currency and could be used anywhere. Frankincense is traditionally used as incense, something that would be used to worship the Divine. Myrrh is a strongly scented perfume, generally used in preparation of a dead body.

SO, it appears that the wise ones gave the infant Jesus three symbols: Of kinship on earth (gold), of kinship with God (frankincense) and of kinship with death (myrrh). They gave his family earthy elements of a Divine presence, together with elements that would prepare for his life and also, for his death. How did they know?

A modern day equivalent would be arriving at a baby shower with a Canada Savings Bond, some incense sticks with holder and a jar of embalming fluid.

How many times have we come to a crossroads in our life? There have been many of them in my own life. If I made a different choice in my late-teens I likely would have become a teacher instead of a priest and minister. If I had not spent time in a rehabilitation centre in my early 20's, I likely would be long-dead now from addiction. If I had chosen a different partner in my late 20's, I may never have come to British Columbia.

Both the wise ones and the holy family were told to take another road. The wise ones returned to their home, by another road. Joseph took his family to Egypt, instead of Nazareth.

How many of us have lived in the same house all our life? How many of us have lived in different cities? How many of us have lived in different provinces? Or states? Or countries?

My dad had an uncle who was a sheet-metal worker in England. He worked on a machine that punched blanks out of sheet metal. Five days a week, 50 weeks a year. He walked the same way to and from work. He took the same lunch. On his holidays he went to the same seaside resort. And his life was perfectly content. The thought of that life, to me, does not appeal. And yet I yearn for his contentment.

If we have learned anything from this past year, it is that things can change in an instant. From gathering at a parish supper one day, to shuttering the doors to that same building in another. From worshipping in person, to gathering online. From finding community in the touch of people to discovering community online through a screen.

The service we are using today is from Wild Goose Publications, which is from the island of Iona, an ecumenical, monastic community. The title of the service is Enter With Joy, and the first section speaks of the many ways God is made manifest at the time of Epiphany. Epiphany = manifestation.

In a refugee child at play, a stranger receiving water from a woman, a young man asking for baptism. All of these things made manifest through God.

The wise ones brought the gifts they did, because they knew that this child was King of the Jews. They brought him gold, frankincense and myrrh to acknowledge that this child was no ordinary child. He, Jesus, was the manifestation of God brought to earth. A humble baby boy, born of humble parents. The manifestation of God's love brought to Earth.

A plea to the world to stop living in complacency and fear. A plea to recognize the divinity in our midst. A plea to travel home by another road. With Jesus came significant change to the world.

With COVID-19 came a significant change to our world. A vaccine has been developed and is being distributed. But that does not mean that things will return to how they were before the pandemic; to return to how they have always been. They cannot. And we cannot.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the day that God's love was manifested on earth. From that day humanity has changed, and we must continue to do so.

Let us remember that baby boy, a boy like every boy, and yet a boy like no other.

May we live our lives with the awe of the wise ones. Kneeling at the feet of the infant. They in lavish robes, he in ordinary clothes. They, wishing to know the closeness he knew with God. We, longing for that closeness made manifest. When love came down to Earth. Love which we are called to share with all we encounter in the hope that they, too, may long for the manifestation of love.

A love which we find and share, only when we are prepared to do things differently, not as they always have been done.

When we are prepared to stretch ourselves beyond our complacency, and dare to try another way; and go home by another road.

Amen

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Matthew 2.1-12
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