

“Ripples in the Pond of Life.”

This morning, we are *observing* the feast day of The Epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ. But before I get to what I want to talk about, some background information about this feast day might be helpful.

The word, “epiphany” refers to something that has happened— it could be an event, but I suspect it could even be a sudden insight— that shows forth, or illuminates, or reveals something *about God* which we didn’t know before.

Throughout her 2,000 history, the Church has recognized three events in the life and ministry of Jesus that stood apart, and were somehow unique, as epiphanies: The visit of the wise men, which was the subject of our gospel reading; The baptism of Jesus; And Jesus’ first miracle of changing water into wine, at a friend’s wedding reception.

But the thing is, epiphanies are not meant to stand on their own and be admired, like so much artwork in a gallery. They are supposed to change not only the way we see the world, and also and especially the way we *live* in the world.

And it’s not so unusual for them to begin as small things, like the birth of a baby in a little town called Bethlehem, or someone preparing for their baptism, or a family celebrating a wedding.

But then, like a pebble that is dropped into water, they set off a series of concentric ripples that get bigger and bigger and bigger, until the entire surface of the water, even if imperceptibly, has been set into motion. And we who were witnesses of the *original* event, are now joint-participants in the events that follow.

And people who were once strangers, now having witnessed that epiphany, are now journeying together, carried along by the same tide. And so, epiphanies begin— sometimes with something miraculous, but just as often with something mundane— but they are always ending in new, and often in renewed, relationships.

Now, having said all that, let's take a few moments and turn our attention to today's gospel reading, the story of how "wise men from the East" came to the cradle of Jesus.

One of the favorite hymns associated with this story, is that which we sang as our gospel hymn, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*. However, if you were paying close attention to the gospel reading, you might have picked up on the fact that the text says nothing about the visitors being kings, or even that there were just three of them.

But what we do know about them comes from the fact that the Greek word which Matthew uses to describe them is *magos*. And that means they were men of wisdom and learning; men whose job it was to study things like the natural sciences, like the interpretation of dreams, and especially the position and movement of the stars and planets. And *magi*— which is the plural form of *magos*— were often employed by kings and rulers to provide them with guidance and direction. So, when Jesus was born, *magi* from the East came to pay him homage.

So, what prompted them to come at that time, and to that place?

Well, I have to confess that in earlier drafts of this sermon, I went into a considerable amount of detail exploring what they might have seen, and why it was significant. However, I began to feel like all that information was becoming more of a distraction from my main message; so, in this my final draft, I decided to just cut to the chase. But if you'd like to know all of the details, just come and see me afterwards.

So, what happened was that these *magi* saw something in the heavens that seemed to suggest that a new leader or ruler was about to arise. And what clinched it for them was the fact that they saw it at a time when there was a general sense of expectation throughout their culture that a significant new ruler or leader would arise. So, they really had no choice but to follow this "star" and see where it would lead them.

Well, as it turns out, people are still waiting for God to do something new, and they're looking for signs to show them that God is at work in the world. And even though most people are looking upward or outward for those signs, it may actually be the case that they need to look no further than to people like you and me.

Let me explain.

We are entering into the final phase of what I would anticipate to be a very contentious and divisive political season. We are going to hear things, and see things, that will test our resolve, that will try our patience, and just generally blow our minds. And we will be sorely tempted to respond *in kind* through whatever means is at our disposal— and especially the social media. And unless we are very careful, and exercise a tremendous amount of what I would call Christian discipline, we will end up offering nothing constructive, but only contribute to the generally negative din; as participants in a political conversation that is, to quote William Shakespeare, “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (*Macbeth*, William Shakespeare, Act 5, Scene 5).

You see, as the people of God, we are joint-witnesses of an epiphany, and that epiphany is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that gospel, that epiphany, calls us to follow a different path from the mainstream of our society. And, I dare say, that when we are faithful to our call as the people of God, we ourselves become a type of epiphany as well. Which is to say, that through the things we say and do, and through the choices we make and the paths we follow, we are making statements about who we believe God is, and what we believe God expects of us.

And so, and in anticipation of the coming political season, I would like to suggest that we all commit to memory a particular passage of scripture.

In his letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi, St. Paul is attempting to encourage his readers to resist their baser instincts, and instead live according to a higher ethic. At verse 8 of chapter 4, he writes:

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).

In other words, God calls us *not* to be a part of the disease— the dis-ease— that so often infiltrates our common political discourses, but to be part of the cure.

You see, two thousand years ago, God dropped a pebble into that pond which we call Bethlehem. And the ripple effects of that event are still being felt today. And people today, as they were then, are still looking for of guidance, and community, and meaning for their lives. And the task that God has given to us, is to remember the story of what first caused those ripples, and to help others enter into a renewed life.

You and I are, on this day, in this moment, and for forever, the living epiphanies of God. With what began as a miracle two thousand years ago, has resulted in countless renewed lives. And, by the grace of God, we are a part of that process of renewal. And through us, that process will continue.

Amen.