

The Magi, a Light, and a Different Road

[Isaiah 60:1 – 6; Psalm 72; Matthew 2:1 – 12]

January 7, 2018 **Epiphany** – St. Agatha Mennonite Church

The nativity sets have all been put away now. The stable, the shepherds and sheep, Mary and Joseph, and of course, the baby Jesus laying in the manger. They have all been packed up for another year. But today the wise men show up. Sometimes we call them kings or magi but we really don't know much about them or even how many of them there were. We tend to set them up as part of the nativity scene but as Matthew describes their visit, it is clear that they have arrived well after the actual birth of Jesus. By the time they show up, Mary and Joseph are living in a house with their young son.

In one sense the story of the magi is not really a Christmas story but it is the final story of Jesus' infancy and it closes the chapter on Bethlehem. And it ends up by placing Jesus in Nazareth from where he can begin his ministry years later. So this story becomes a transition story in the gospel narrative but it can also be a transition story for us as we move beyond Christmas into a new year.

The story of the magi begins with a light – the star that they see in the sky. It seems that these magi were astrologers or star gazers. The term “magi” is a Latin translation from the original Greek word which became an umbrella term that refers a wide range of people who exercised special religious or occult powers. Among these were astrologers, which seems to be the case here. While studying the sky they discovered something special and understood this to be the sign of a significant birth. As the gospel writer John would say, “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming in to the world.” [John 1:9] It seems this true light had even enlightened these astrologers from Persia.

The light in this story also connects us back to the prophet Isaiah. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” [Isaiah 60:1] Isaiah is speaking to a people in darkness, in exile but he is pointing to the God of light.

And this light is not something new - from the beginning of Genesis we read about this light. When the earth was a formless void and covered in darkness, God spoke light into being, “let there be light”. God was the source of light from the beginning. The gospel writer John also describes the beginning of time in terms of light. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” This was not just any light but this light is life itself – the source of all life. And it is this light that Isaiah says will draw kings from far-away nations, bringing gifts.

So in Matthew we read about these kings, or wise men, or magi who are drawn to the light of God, even if they are not entirely sure what they are looking at or exactly where they are going. After seeing this light, they begin their journey from their home and find themselves in Jerusalem searching for the new king so they can worship him.

Isaiah talked about the light coming into a world covered in darkness and the world around Jerusalem at the time of Herod was indeed covered in darkness. Herod was a ruthless leader, one who would kill his own family if he felt they were a threat to him. Into this darkness a light was coming. It is ironic that as the magi followed the light they would end up in the palace of Herod – a source of darkness in this land.

You can imagine what Herod might have been thinking when he was told that he had visitors who had travelled from Persia to speak with him. Maybe he had thoughts of the Queen of Sheba coming from far away to visit with King Solomon and bringing great gifts. Maybe Herod was already thinking of the increase of his wealth as these gifts were added to his treasury. After all, the great prophet Isaiah had said kings would come bringing gifts of gold and frankincense. But imagine his shock when the magi told him it wasn't him they had come to see – there was a new king born, this is the one whom the light pointed to. Herod wasn't the light, he couldn't even see the light. So now he became frightened and angry, so much so that all Jerusalem was also now frightened.

The magi now saw the light again and this time it led them to Bethlehem, to a simple house where Mary and Joseph now lived with their son. The light was not shining in the palace of Herod but instead on this simple dwelling in the town of Bethlehem. The light had changed everything, including the social order when these dignitaries from a foreign country left the palace to visit a poor family in Bethlehem. The light was shining in this poor neighbourhood and dispelling the darkness.

It is interesting to contrast the way the magi responded to this light in comparison to Herod. The magi followed the light even when it took them in an unexpected way – they first tried the royal palace but when this proved not to be the way, they continued and trusted where the light was leading them, even when it took them to a small home in Bethlehem. But Herod's reaction was much different, Herod's reaction was based on fear and protecting the world he had built for himself. Eventually this fear would lead him to a massacre of small children, all in an effort to protect his kingdom, his wealth, and his status. Herod was overcome by his own darkness and closed himself off to the light. Whereas the magi made themselves vulnerable and allowed themselves to be led by a light they didn't fully understand but they recognized the leading as light.

There is a Leonard Cohen song that speaks of light and there is a line, "there is a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in." It is only as we make ourselves vulnerable, allow that crack to let the light in, that the light can work in us. Herod protected himself from any crack in his shell and he remained in his darkness. The magi recognized that they didn't have all the answers, they weren't self-sufficient and able to do everything themselves. It was this vulnerability, this weakness, this crack that let the light get in. And the light overcame their own darkness and the light changed everything for them.

When they first saw the light it caused them to leave the comfort of their homes and took them to a foreign country, to the palace of Herod, which seemed like an appropriate place for them to go to see a king. But the second time they saw the light, it caused them to change their course from the predictable to the unexpected – but they still followed that light.

Finally, after seeing the king, they changed their course once again and returned home by a different road. We don't read anything more about the magi but over the years various traditions or stories have been told about who they were and what became of them. Some talk of their martyrdom after having converted to Christianity after their encounter in Bethlehem. But really we don't know anything about what happened afterwards. What we do know is that these magi (whoever they were and how ever many there were) were moved by the light, by the light of God, and they trusted that light and even risked their lives – what would have happened if Herod would have found them since they didn't return to him as he had told them.

These magi encountered the light and were changed. Isaiah's prophecy says, "Lift up your eyes and look around" – it is a call to see, to perceive what God is doing and then to participate in what God is doing. This is what the magi did. They saw the light, they sought to understand it as best they could, and they got up and followed the light. Herod didn't see the light because he was focused on himself, he was too afraid to look up at what was around him and was only concerned with preserving his own way. He did not allow even a crack so the light could shine in on him. The magi not only allowed the light to shine through that crack but they broke it open and allowed the light to change their lives.

The light points to a different road. For us today Christmas has become routine, tradition, each year we go through the motions of the season. And these traditions are not bad things, we celebrate together, we spend time with family, we give gifts to each other, and we share our joy and love. People seem more friendly with each other, sometimes even waiting in long line-ups to pay for our purchases there is a more friendly atmosphere. People give generously – working for a charity we see some many donations coming in the last week or two of the year and I don't think it is only about getting a tax receipt before the year is over – Christmas generates in people an attitude of giving.

But there comes a time when the gifts are all unwrapped (some are even broken by the time we go to bed Christmas night), the decorations are put away, the tree is thrown out, and life gets back to normal. We go back to our regular routines and back to our lives. However, the message of Christmas, is that the light has come into the world and the light doesn't go away. The light has come to dispel the darkness, the light has come to change our lives.

We are called, like the people who heard the prophet Isaiah, like the magi, we are called to **lift up our eyes and look around**, we are called to **arise and shine for our light has come**. We are called to **take a different road**. We are called to **perceive the light and to participate in the light of God**, in the work of God.

We are called to open ourselves to God's light, to allow that crack through which the light gets in, to turn our focus away from ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable. To follow the example of the magi as they saw the star and allowed it to change their lives.

We call this Sunday Epiphany which comes from a Greek word which means "shining forth". We are called to shine forth the light of God. The light is not just for our benefit but so that we can reflect that light, to allow it to shine forth to others.

Some of you have seen some of my pictures on facebook and Instagram and you may know that I love to take photos. One of my favourite subjects is to take pictures of the moon. There is something about it that draws me to photograph it or some nights just stare up at it. As a child growing up in the 60s and 70s, I was fascinated by the astronauts travelling there and dreamed of someday going there myself. I don't have those dreams anymore but I am still amazed as I look at the moon.

The moon is not the source of the light but it reflects the light and on a clear night with a full moon, it is amazing how might light is really reflected. But the moon can also diminish the light of the sun. This past summer we experienced a solar eclipse when the moon blocked the light of the sun – it wasn't quite a total eclipse here and it didn't last for long but it was incredible to see how the moon, which is so much smaller than the sun, could actually block it out.

There is an obvious comparison between the moon reflecting the sun's light and us reflecting God's light. We aren't the source of that light but we can reflect it and when we reflect it as fully as possible it can shine brightly and light the way for others to see. However, it is also possible that sometimes we block God's light – we can prevent others from seeing God. We have the potential for being a source of darkness when our focus, like Herod's is on ourselves.

But our calling is to take a different road, to shine forth the light of God, reflect this light so others can see it and they may also be changed.

My prayer is that even though we have packed up Christmas for another year, the light of Christmas, the light of God will continue to shine forth in us throughout this year. That we can each open ourselves to God's light, so that we can be a reflection of the one who created us, the one true source of light.

Amen.