



Reflection - A Feast of Epiphanies

By David Sellery

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.' When 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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These first verses from the second chapter of Matthew are among the most action packed accounts found in the whole sixty-six books of the Bible. A

Hollywood script writer would be hard pressed to match the inspiration and the intrigue, the triumph and the treachery. As a preacher, I'm swamped with the symbolic richness of this gospel. A single sermon doesn't do it justice. But let's try.

One brief definition of an epiphany is: a sudden intuitive insight into the essential meaning of something. This morning's gospel for the Feast of the Epiphany is literally a feast of epiphanies. It is chock full of insights into the meaning of the coming of Christ and the transformation it promises for you and me and for all the people of the world.

Start with the vision of the Magi. They had devoted their lives to studying the heavens. And then suddenly there was a brilliant light they'd never seen before and couldn't explain. They dropped everything and set out to follow the star, mile after mile, over mountains and deserts, fixed faithfully on the celestial signpost that lead them to the newborn Jesus. What star do you follow? Where does it lead you? Does it lead to Jesus? Or is it all about getting and keeping more stuff - filling the hole in our souls with things? A bigger paycheck, a bigger house, season tickets, the best table, the latest iPad, the hippest sneakers? They are all really great stuff to have. But go to as many funerals as I do and they shrink to insignificance. The Magi got it right the first time. Follow your star to Jesus - his love, his way - they are really all that endures.

All four gospels have many examples of the Messiah of the chosen people reaching out to all the people of God's creation. But this is the very first. And this time the star reached very far, all the way to Persia. We walk in the footsteps of the Magi. Our home is even more distant than Persia. We follow Christ from across cultures and across millennia. The gates of heaven have been thrown open to us. No matter how humble our condition, we stand before the throne of God no less noble than the kings, no less beloved than the prophets, no less entitled than Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Magi did not come empty handed. And neither should we. Jesus, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, does not need gold, frankincense and myrrh. All creation does his bidding. But he does want us to give back, for our own sake, to demonstrably express our gratitude, to get some skin in the game. Our gifts, our tithes, our charity, our service - all don't buy us God's love and our redemption. Those are gifts outright. The Magi did not bribe the star to lead them to Jesus. They did not payoff Mary and Joseph to see their child. They humbly laid their gifts at the feet of the newborn king in adoration, in gratitude and in awe. And so should we.

And then there's Herod. The world has seen his like so many times before and since. In his self-centered soul, the Epiphany is all about him. It is an opportunity to eliminate a potential rival, no matter what the cost. Deceit, deception, mass murder: these are things that happen to other people. They're the average tyrant's cost of doing business.

Haven't we all got even the tiniest touch of Herod in us? We take life on our terms. We are the arbiters of good and evil. And what we think is going to be good for us, we almost always see as the obvious good. We don't operate on the same scale or with the same rapacity as Herod, but we let our egos lead us around by the nose. Epiphany is a good time to alter that course. Only Jesus is the way, the truth and the light. It is time to follow the star to Jesus. The Magi did not journey alone. They journeyed together. And so should we. Jesus is waiting. In joyful praise and adoration, let's follow the star together.

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