



“Aha!”

Scripture – Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, January 6, 2019

Although we celebrated Christmas nearly two weeks ago, I want to dial us back to Christmas Eve. How many of you have ever put out milk and cookies for Santa before going to bed on Christmas Eve?

Today is Epiphany, and as you heard in today’s gospel lectionary reading, the focus is still on the birth of Jesus. In the Eastern world – Greece, Turkey, the Balkans, and countries of the former Soviet Union – Christians are holding special celebrations today while many Christians in the West are not even cognizant of the significance of January 6th. I suspect they would be surprised to learn that Christians began celebrating Epiphany more than 100 years before they began celebrating Christmas.

Not all western Christians are unaware of the significance of this day. In Spain and a number of Latin American countries, Epiphany is a major holiday. It is known as “Three Kings Day.”

Magdalena Garcia, a minister who grew up in Cuba, said that when she was a child, her Christmas celebration did not include a special visitor from the North Pole. Instead, on January 6th, she became excited about the visit of the three kings. They brought gifts to children. Of course, that’s who brought gifts to the infant Jesus. Garcia says that “since these kings came from the East, bearing gifts and traveling in a camel caravan, her holiday preparations included gathering fresh water and grass for the camels.”¹ And living in Cuba, their country added its own twist to prepare for the Magi. Her family set out for the kings, not milk and cookies, but cigars!

The word Epiphany is rooted in a Greek word that means “appearance” or “revelation.” We often use the word epiphany to mean a new insight – an aha moment when we see something in a new light. An epiphany can make a minor impact on us or it can be a life-changing event.

The Church denotes the Day of Epiphany by reading Matthew’s story of the Magi being led by the star to Jesus. The story tells of Christ being revealed to Gentiles – the day when non-Jews had an aha moment. Aha! Jesus of Nazareth is the one we have been searching for; the one who reveals the essence of life.

Perhaps Epiphany of the Lord Day should be a time for each of us to reflect on our personal spiritual aha moments – those times when “a threshold we had never noticed opened”² and we were changed. Perhaps it was a moment similar to what Scrooge experienced when he saw for the first time how his greed was destroying his soul and he chose the liberation of a generous spirit over the shackles of greed. It could be a moment when we realized why others saw us as self-absorbed and we decided to talk less and listen more. Or perhaps a moment when we became aware of ways that we were unforgiving or cynical or controlling and we chose a nobler path.

The story of the magi is a well-known part of the Christmas story despite the fact that it prompts numerous questions. Who are these people from the East who follow a star to the birthplace of Jesus? Most of us are accustomed to thinking of them as kings, thanks to our hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” But the Greek manuscripts upon which our English translations are based do not use the Greek word for king. The word *magi* means “astrologer” and may refer to a sect of priests in ancient Persia. It is unclear when the church morphed *magi* into *kings*, but nearly every English Bible refers to them as *astrologers* or *wise men*, not kings.

The word *men* is also a problem. The Greek text does not say they were men. The magi could have been men or women or some of each.

How many magi were there? We cannot say definitively. No where does the text indicate the number. The traditional number simply comes from the fact that there were three gifts. However, several people could have brought the same gift.

Then, there is the problem of the star. If the magi spotted the star from many miles away and followed it to Bethlehem, why didn't anyone else see it? Why did Herod summon the chief priests and scribes to ascertain the birthplace of the Messiah? Why didn't he just look out the window?

However, we overlook the genius and the inspiration of the gospel writer if we pursue a flat, literal reading of his story. It reveals far more treasures if we decipher its symbols. Herod, a diabolical tyrant, exemplifies darkness and all that is awry with the world. The star is not merely a sign in the sky marking the place of Jesus' birth. It points to a new age in which a light will arise that will not be quenched by the darkness.

Not only theologians, but also philosophers, poets and politicians have employed *light* as a powerful metaphor. Philosopher Allan Bloom portrayed light as wisdom when he said, “Education is the movement from darkness to light.” Martin Luther King, Jr. used light to represent virtue when he said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” Helen Keller, who, of course, was literally blind, understood light as a potent symbol for hope. She said, “Faith is the strength by which a shattered world shall emerge into the light.”

As you already know, light is a prominent metaphor in the Scriptures. The Gospel of John opens by identifying Jesus as the light that shines in the darkness. Then, as this gospel unfolds, we see that Jesus is the light that personifies wisdom, virtue, and hope. Jesus even refers to himself as the light. He says, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Matthew's star conveys the same sentiment. Jesus is the light of the world who will initiate the spreading of God's reign on earth where wisdom, virtue, and hope will one day prevail.

And, what about the gifts the magi supposedly bestowed on Jesus? Did they really present Jesus with gold? The scriptures never waver from their depiction of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph as poor. Did the magi give precious treasures to Jesus OR did they give the most valuable gift of all – themselves?

When Jesus was revealed to the Gentiles, some rejected him, but some represented by the magi – fell on their knees and dedicated their lives to him. Giving ourselves to something greater than ourselves makes life rich and spawns serenity in our soul.

If Matthew's story of the magi is more than an historical report of an event that occurred at the birth of Jesus – if it is a story for all times – then there is a deeper message for us. When Matthew says the magi went home by another road, I think he could be talking about a transformation that took place *within* the magi – a transformation

that prompted them to choose the road that is the antithesis of darkness, the antithesis of evil, ignorance, and despair – the road that leads to wisdom and virtue and hope, which is the road of light.

Palestinian poet, Taha Muhammad Ali lives under Israeli occupation. He dreamt of extracting revenge on the man who murdered his father, and to that end, he wrote a poem called “Revenge.” It begins with him imagining himself challenging his father’s murderer to a duel. But as he writes about his desire to even the score, he has an epiphany that transforms him.

“Revenge”

By Taha Muhammad Ali

At times I wish
I could meet in a duel
the man who killed my father
and razed our home,
expelling me
into a narrow country.
And if he killed me,
I’d rest at last,
and if I were ready –
I would take my revenge!

But if it came to light,
when my rival appeared,
that he had a mother
waiting for him,
or a father who’d put
his right hand over
the heart’s place in his chest
whenever his son was late
even by just a quarter-hour
for a meeting they’d set –
then I would not kill him,
even if I could.

Likewise, I
would not murder him
if it were soon made clear
that he had a brother or sisters
who loved him and constantly longed to see him.
Or if he had a wife to greet him
and children who
could not bear his absence
and whom his gifts would thrill.
Or if he had
friends or companions,
neighbors he knew
or allies from prison
or a hospital room,
or classmates from his school

asking about him
and sending him regards.

But if he turned
out to be on his own –
cut off like a branch from a tree –
without a mother or father,
with neither a brother nor sister,
wifeless, without a child,
and without kin or neighbors or friends,
colleagues or companions,
then I would not add a thing to his pain
within that aloneness –
not the torment of death,
and not the sorrow of passing away.
Instead I would be content
to ignore him when I passed him by
on the street – as I
convinced myself
that paying him no attention
in itself was a kind of revenge.

When we make a deep dive in our spiritual lives, we open ourselves to the possibility of being transformed. The “compass of our soul”³ will turn us away from darkness and guide us toward the light. And like the magi, we discover a different road; one that will carry us to our true home which is our home in God.

NOTES

1. Magdalena I. García, *Presbyterians Today*, December 20, 2018.
2. John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, (Great Britain: Bantam Press, 2003), p. 12.
3. John O’Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p.54.

New Year Prayer ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Loving God, when we gaze at our world in light of what it could be – a place where all have plenty of daily bread, where all are treated with respect, where all are safe, where none is enslaved or oppressed, where compassion reigns and people dwell in peace – we are tempted to become cynical and despairing. Too many Herods score too many victories. Too many selfish acts fracture community. Too many lies masquerade as truth. Too many acts of violence spread waves of fear. We pray that in the coming year we may resist the darkness that threatens to destroy us and turn instead to the light of Christ.

Inspire us to face setbacks with determination,

To resist fear with courage,
To confront deception with truth,
To meet contempt with respect,
To counter indifference with compassion, and
To defy darkness with hope.

In the year to come, may we be open to epiphanies large and small that provide opportunities to draw closer to you and the life you dream for us to live. With our families, with our friends, and with strangers, may we respond

to pain with compassion, to frustration with encouragement, to betrayal with forgiveness, and to cruel words with kindness.

In the days ahead we will face obstacles as well as opportunities. May we meet them with a Christ-like spirit – a spirit characterized by love, justice, and peace – so that we may experience the joy and the hope of a life of faith.

Now, we join our voices in the words Jesus taught us to live by, as we pray together, saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven...”**