



“Drip, Drip, Drip”
Scripture – Matthew 2:1-12
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 5, 2020

How many of you have put away your Christmas decorations? I suspect most people have pulled down their trees, boxed up their ornaments and tucked away their stockings. Some of you may have been a bit surprised to see our tree still standing on the chancel and the candles of the advent wreath burning. It is not because someone forgot to remove the signs of Christmas before the first Sunday in January. It is because the church is on a different schedule than retailers. Despite the fact that some stores are already pushing Valentine’s Day, the church celebrates Christmas through Epiphany, which is tomorrow, January 6th.

Epiphany comes from the language of the Greeks and means “appearance” or “revelation.” Epiphany is the day the church celebrates Christ, the Jewish Messiah, being revealed to Gentiles. We commemorate the day by reading Matthew’s story about the Magi—Gentiles from the East who discover and worship Jesus.

If we could question the magi regarding what prompted them to leave the safety and security of their native land to take a journey that was anything but risk-free, what would they say? From our text, we would assume their answer would be: “A star.” But is that the complete answer? Might it have been a restlessness with life for something more?

We often use the word epiphany to mean a flash of insight – an “Aha!” moment when we perceive something in a new light and we find ourselves saying, “I get it.” Sometimes an epiphany is a startling insight that knocks our socks off. Other times it is a softer, quieter thought that slowly emerges into our awareness, like making our way through a fog that slowly dissipates until we discover ourselves standing on a patch where we can see clearly.

The magi represent the moment when non-Jews gained a striking awareness. Aha! Jesus of Nazareth is the one for whom we have been searching; the one who reveals the essence of life.

Camilla and I do not watch a great deal of television, but I confess we have become hooked on “The Crown.” How many of you have seen at least one episode?

The series is in its third season and it is focused on Queen Elizabeth II and the royal family. However, it is as much about significant historical moments in the past 75 years as it is the personal identities and struggles of the royals.

Over the Christmas break we watched the episode that highlights the first astronauts who landed on the moon in July, 1969. Those of you under 50 were not yet born, but I suspect that those of us over 60 can tell you precisely where we were when it happened. How many remember where you were that summer night in 1969?

While much of the focus in this episode is on the remarkable achievement of rocketing three men 238,000 miles to the moon, walking on its surface and then returning to earth, the lunar landing is actually the backdrop for what is going on inside of the queen's husband, Prince Philip. He is restless and feeling frustrated that he has not accomplished something truly astounding. He is irritable and quick to criticize.

While in this fractious state, he attends church with his wife. The old Dean's sermon not only seems irrelevant, he loses his place and everyone is embarrassed. The Dean appears to be older than Moses and after the worship service, Philip growls to Elizabeth that he could have spent that time doing something productive. The Queen recognizes that it's time for the Dean to retire and soon a new one appears on the scene.

The new Dean comes to Philip and boldly requests permission to use one of the empty houses on the grounds of Windsor Castle. He seeks to create "an academy (for priests) for personal and spiritual growth." He says to Philip, "You get to a certain age and you get into a slump...(this would be an opportunity for the priests) to recharge, reflect, and raise their game...by reading, reflecting, and talking."

Philip says, "Your concept is flawed. You don't raise your game by thinking or talking. You raise your game like *this* – (pointing to the newspaper with an enormous headline about the lunar landing). But if one of those buildings is free and you want to fill it with hot air and thought, be my guest."

"Philip stops attending Church. On Sunday morning he goes for a run instead. Dean Robin Woods decides to speak to him and requests that he meet the priests. In the meeting, the priests self-reflect about their life, but Philip insults them calling their thoughts 'pretentious self-pity nonsense' and states the best thing to do is to enter the world and make a mark 'just like those astronauts did.' He abruptly walks out on the shocked group of priests."¹

After returning from the moon, the astronauts do a world tour. One stop on their tour is Buckingham Palace. Philip is more than thrilled about the opportunity to have a private meeting with Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin.

When Philip meets with the astronauts, he expects to be in the presence of giants – charismatic men who possess not only fierce courage, but profound insights. He hopes their awesome experience has revealed secrets of the universe that might rub off on him. Instead, he is vastly underwhelmed by three men who came down with colds in the wet English weather and have nothing profound to share.

Philip has a dawning awareness that focusing most of our energy on doing something jaw-dropping – accomplishing something people will remember – is fool's gold. It makes you taller in the eyes of others, but inside, you know there is much about you that is not noble and certainly not worthy of adoration.

I suspect Philip also realized that you can only experience the joy and satisfaction of a significant accomplishment for so long. The past fades; the glory dims. You can only get high on a past triumph for so long.

In the final scene, Philip is sitting with the Dean and the group of priests once again. He is obviously distraught as he says, "There wasn't a specific moment when it started. It's been more of a gradual thing; a drip, drip, drip of doubt." He confesses that he has lost his faith and he humbly pleads to the priests for help.

As the episode ends, we read on the screen that Philip and the Dean became lifelong friends. For over 50 years, the house the Dean requested has been a center for the exploration of faith and philosophy. Its success is one of the achievements of which Philip is proudest.

Often we attempt to inflate our ego by doing something noteworthy. We try to fashion our identity by making a mark. But over time, the accomplishment dims and we must make another mark. Then, another.

Faith requires a different approach. Rather than trying to promote ourselves, we give ourselves to God. That opens the door for us to constantly uncover layers of our identity and our purpose as a child of God.

Sometimes an epiphany is an exciting new revelation that wows us, but often times an epiphany reveals what was always right before our eyes and leaves us wondering why we had not seen it before. That is the feeling I had while preparing this sermon when I read what one scholar (Thomas Troeger) said about the passage. Referring to the action of the magi, he points out that the *order* of their actions is key. They do not march up to Mary and child and immediately present their gifts. What do they do first? They kneel down to express their devotion. First, they worship, then they offer their gifts.

How do we deepen our faith?

Where do we glean meaning?

What will give us a sense of satisfaction deep in our soul?

For most of us it is not a flash of light, a star in the sky, or a dramatic incident. Rather it is a steady drip, drip, drip of worship, of prayer, of reflection. As we embark on a new year, may each of us commit to a journey that will draw us closer to God.

NOTES

1. Daniel Hart, "The Crown Recap: Midlife Crisis Evaluating Your Own Life," readtsteadycut.com, November 17, 2019.

Prayers of the People

Eternal God, when we gaze at our world in light of what it could be – a place where all have plenty of daily bread, where each woman, man and child is 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 our hearts and minds 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.

Loving God, for those experiencing serious health issues, we pray that your healing Spirit will be present in the doctors and nurses who provide treatment. Give these medical professionals hefty doses of wisdom and kindness and may the drugs they administer be powerful and effective.

For those grieving the loss of loved ones, may they know that nothing can separate them from your love, and may they receive the support they need from family and friends.

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, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.